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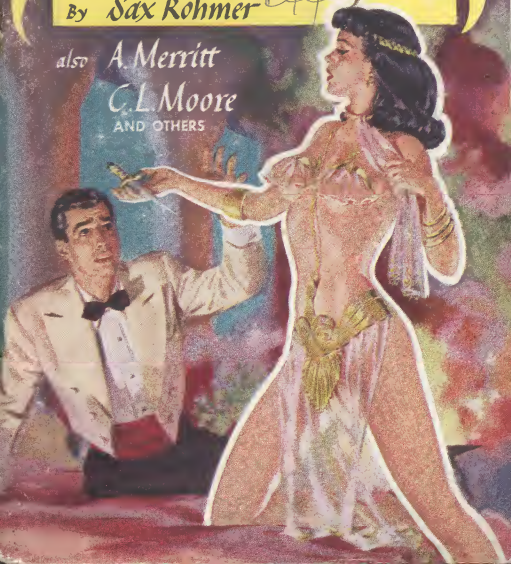
THE CURSE OF A THOUSAND KISSES

By Sax Rohmer *et al*

also A. Merritt

C. L. Moore

AND OTHERS



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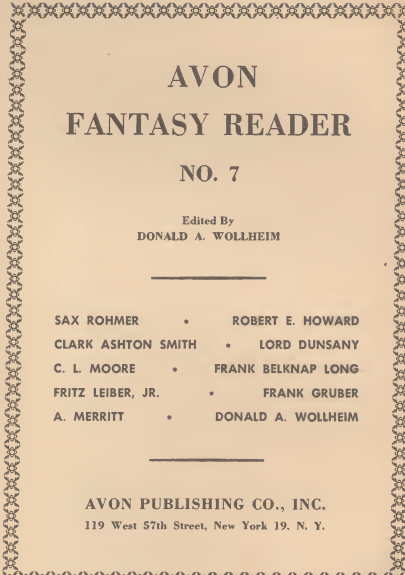
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FANTASY READER

NO. 7

Edited By
DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

SAX ROHMER	•	ROBERT E. HOWARD
CLARK ASHTON SMITH	•	LORD DUNSANY
C. L. MOORE	•	FRANK BELKNAP LONG
FRITZ LEIBER, JR.	•	FRANK GRUBER
A. MERRITT	•	DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

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Contents

SHAMBLEAU by C. L. Moore.....	3
THE CURSE OF A THOUSAND KISSES by Sax Rohmer	29
THE DREAMS OF ALBERT MORELAND by Fritz Leiber, Jr....	40
THE SLUGLY BEAST by Lord Dunsany.....	54
THE CAIRN ON THE HEADLAND by Robert E. Howard.....	63
AQUELLA by Donald A. Wollheim.....	80
THE EMPIRE OF THE NECROMANCERS by Clark Ashton Smith	85
WHEN OLD GODS WAKE by A. Merritt.....	94
THE WERE-SNAKE by Frank Belknap Long, Jr.	99
THE GUN by Frank Gruber	111

Shambleau

by C. L. Moore

C. L. Moore, who by this time needs no introduction to our readers, made her own introduction to fantasy with this story. When it originally appeared, the author was unknown, no one knew whether it was a man or a woman, and the title of the story conveyed nothing to those who saw it for the first time in print. Now, after that momentous debut, everyone knows that Catherine L. Moore (now Mrs. Henry Kuttner) ranks tops as a teller of tales of interplanetary terror, that Shambleau is a story of a Solar System Medusa that ranks foremost among her works, and that it has never been reprinted, despite tremendous acclaim, from the year of its initial solo appearance until the pages you are now reading came off the presses.



M

AN HAS CONQUERED Space before. You may be sure of that. Somewhere beyond the Egyptians, in that dimness out of which come echoes of half-mythical names—Atlantis, Mu—somewhere back of history's first beginnings there must have been an age when mankind, like us today, built cities of steel to house its star-roving ships and knew the names of the planets in their own native tongues—heard Venus' people call their wet world "Sha-ardol" in that soft, sweet, slurring speech and mimicked Mars' guttural "Lakkdiz" from the harsh tongues of Mars' dryland dwellers. You may be sure of it. Man has conquered Space before, and out of that conquest faint, faint echoes run still through a world that has forgotten the very fact of a civilization which must have been as mighty as our own. There have been too many myths and legends for us to doubt it. The myth of the Medusa, for instance, can never have had its roots in the soil of Earth. That tale of the snake-haired Gorgon whose gaze turned the gazer to stone never originated about any creature that Earth nourished. And those ancient Greeks who told the story must have remembered, dimly and half believing, a tale of antiquity about some strange being from one of the outlying planets their remotest ancestors once trod.

"Shambleau! Ha . . . Shambleau!" The wild hysteria of the mob rocketed from wall to wall of Lakkdarol's narrow streets and the storming of heavy boots over the slag-red pavement made an ominous undernote to that swelling bay, "Shambleau! Shambleau!"

Northwest Smith heard it coming and stepped into the nearest doorway, laying a wary hand on his heat-gun's grip, and his colorless eyes narrowed. Strange sounds were common enough in the streets of Earth's latest colony on Mars—a raw, red little town where anything might happen, and very often did. But Northwest Smith, whose name is known and respected in every dive and wild outpost on a dozen wild planets, was a cautious man, despite his reputation. He set his back against the wall and gripped his pistol, and heard the rising shout come nearer and nearer.

Then into his range of vision flashed a red running figure, dodging like a hunted hare from shelter to shelter in the narrow street. It was a girl—a berry-brown girl in a single tattered garment whose scarlet burnt the eyes with its brilliance. She ran wearily, and he could hear her gasping breath from where he stood. As she came into view he saw her hesitate and lean one hand against the wall for support, and glance wildly around for shelter. She must not have seen him in the depths of the doorway, for as the bay of the mob grew louder and the pounding of feet sounded almost at the corner she gave a despairing little moan and dodged into the recess at his very side.

When she saw him standing there, tall and leather-brown, hand on his heat-gun, she sobbed once, inarticulately, and collapsed at his feet, a huddle of burning scarlet and bare, brown limbs.

Smith had not seen her face, but she was a girl, and sweetly made and in danger; and though he had not the reputation of a chivalrous man, something in her hopeless huddle at his feet touched that chord of sympathy for the underdog that stirs in every Earthman, and he pushed her gently into the corner behind him and jerked out his gun, just as the first of the running mob rounded the corner.

It was a motley crowd, Earthmen and Martians and a sprinkling of Venusian swampmen and strange, nameless denizens of unnamed planets—a typical Lakkdarol mob. When the first of them turned the corner and saw the empty street before them there was a faltering in the rush and the foremost spread out and began to search the doorways on both sides of the street.

"Looking for something?" Smith's sardonic call sounded clear above the clamor of the mob.

They turned. The shouting died for a moment as they took in the scene

before them—tall Earthman in the space-explorer's leathern garb, all one color from the burning of savage suns save for the sinister pallor of his no-colored eyes in a scarred and resolute face, gun in his steady hand and the scarlet girl crouched behind him, panting.

The foremost of the crowd—a burly Earthman in tattered leather from which the Patrol insignia had been ripped away—stared for a moment with a strange expression of incredulity on his face overspreading the savage exultation of the chase. Then he let loose a deep-throated bellow, "Shambleau!" and lunged forward. Behind him the mob took up the cry again, "Shambleau! Shambleau! Shambleau!" and surged after.

Smith, lounging negligently against the wall, arms folded and gun-hand draped over his left forearm, looked incapable of swift motion, but at the leader's first forward step the pistol swept in a practised half-circle and the dazzle of blue-white heat leaping from its muzzle scared an arc in the siag pavement at his feet. It was an old gesture, and not a man in the crowd but understood it. The foremost recoiled swiftly against the surge of those in the rear, and for a moment there was confusion as the two tides met and struggled. Smith's mouth curled into a grim curve as he watched. The man in the mutilated Patrol uniform lifted a threatening fist and stepped to the very edge of the deadline, while the crowd rocked to and fro behind him.

"Are you crossing that line?" queried Smith in an ominously gentle voice. "We want that girl!"

"Come and get her!" Recklessly Smith grinned into his face. He saw danger there, but his defiance was not the foolhardy gesture it seemed. An expert psychologist of mobs from long experience, he sensed no murder here. Not a gun had appeared in any hand in the crowd. They desired the girl with an inexplicable bloodthirstiness he was at a loss to understand, but toward himself he sensed no such fury. A mauling he might expect, but his life was in no danger. Guns would have appeared before now if they were coming out at all. So he grinned in the man's angry face and leaned lazily against the wall.

Behind their self-appointed leader the crowd milled impatiently, and threatening voices began to rise again. Smith heard the girl moan at his feet.

"What do you want with her?" he demanded.

"She's Shambleau! Shambleau, you fool! Kick her out of there—we'll take care of her!"

"I'm taking care of her," drawled Smith.

"She's Shambleau, I tell you! Damn your hide, man, we never let those things live! Kick her out here!"

The repeated name had no meaning to him, but Smith's innate stubbornness rose defiantly as the crowd surged forward to the very edge of the arc, their clamor growing louder. "Shambleau! Kick her out here! Give us Shambleau! Shambleau!"

Smith dropped his indolent pose like a cloak and planted both feet wide, swinging up his gun threateningly. "Keep back!" he yelled. "She's mine! Keep back!"

He had no intention of using that heat-beam. He knew by now that they would not kill him unless he started the gun-play himself, and he did not mean to give up his life for any girl alive. But a severe mauling he expected, and he braced himself instinctively as the mob heaved within itself.

To his astonishment a thing happened then that he had never known to happen before. At his shouted defiance the foremost of the mob—those who had heard him clearly—drew back a little, not in alarm but evidently surprised. The ex-Patrolman said, "Yours! She's *yours*?" in a voice from which puzzlement crowded out the anger.

Smith spread his booted legs wide before the crouching figure and flourished his gun.

"Yes," he said. "And I'm keeping her! Stand back there!"

The man stared at him, wordlessly, and horror and disgust and incredulity mingled on his weather-beaten face. The incredulity triumphed for a moment and he said again,

"*Yours!*"

Smith nodded defiance.

The man stepped back suddenly, unutterable contempt in his very pose. He waved an arm to the crowd and said loudly, "It's—his!" and the press melted away, gone silent, too, and the look of contempt spread from face to face.

The ex-Patrolman spat on the slag-paved street and turned his back indifferently. "Keep her, then," he advised briefly over one shoulder. "But don't let her out again in this town!"

Smith stared in perplexity almost open-mouthed as the suddenly scornful mob began to break up. His mind was in a whirl. That such bloodthirsty animosity should vanish in a breath he could not believe. And the curious mingling of contempt and disgust on the faces he saw baffled him even more. Lakkarol was anything but a puritan town—it did not enter his head for a moment that his claiming the brown girl as his own had caused that strangely

shocked revulsion to spread through the crowd. No, it was something deeper-rooted than that. Instinctive, instant disgust had been in the faces he saw—they would have looked less so if he had admitted cannibalism or *Pharol*-worship.

And they were leaving his vicinity as swiftly as if whatever unknowing sin he had committed were contagious. The street was emptying as rapidly as it had filled. He saw a sleek Venusian glance back over his shoulder as he turned the corner and sneer, "Shambleau!" and the word awoke a new line of speculation in Smith's mind. Shambleau! Vaguely of French origin, it must be. And strange enough to hear it from the lips of Venusians and Martian drylanders, but it was their use of it that puzzled him more. "We never let those things live," the ex-Patrolman had said. It reminded him dimly of something . . . an ancient line from some writing in his own tongue . . . "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." He smiled to himself at the similarity, and simultaneously was aware of the girl at his elbow.

She had risen soundlessly. He turned to face her, sheathing his gun and stared at first with curiosity and then in the entirely frank openness with which men regard that which is not wholly human. For she was not. He knew it at a glance, though the brown, sweet body was shaped like a woman's and she wore the garment of scarlet—he saw it was leather—with an ease that few unhuman beings achieve toward clothing. He knew it from the moment he looked into her eyes, and a shiver of unrest went over him as he met them. They were frankly green as young grass, with slit-like, feline pupils that pulsed unceasingly, and there was a look of dark, animal wisdom in their depths—that look of the beast which sees more than man.

There was no hair upon her face—neither brows nor lashes, and he would have sworn that the tight scarlet turban bound around her head covered baldness. She had three fingers and a thumb, and her feet had four digits apiece too, and all sixteen of them were tipped with round claws that sheathed back into the flesh like a cat's. She ran her tongue over her lips—a thin, pink, flat tongue as feline as her eyes—and spoke with difficulty. He felt that that throat and tongue had never been shaped for human speech.

"Not—afraid now," she said softly, and her little teeth were white and pointed as a kitten's.

"What did they want you for?" he asked her curiously. "What had you done? Shambleau . . . is that your name?"

"I—not talk you—speech," she demurred hesitantly.

"Well, try to—I want to know. Why were they chasing you? Will you be

safe on the street now, or hadn't you better get indoors somewhere? They looked dangerous."

"I—go with you." She brought it out with difficulty.

"Say you!" Smith grinned. "What are you, anyhow? You look like a kitten to me."

"Shambleau." She said it somberly.

"Where d'you live? Are you a Martian?"

"I come from—from far—from long ago—far country——"

"Wait!" laughed Smith. "You're getting your wires crossed. You're not a Martian?"

She drew herself up very straight beside him, lifting the turbaned head, and there was something queenly in the poise of her.

"Martian?" she said scornfully. "My people—are—are—you have no word. Your speech—hard for me."

"What's yours? I might know it—try me."

She lifted her head and met his eyes squarely, and there was in hers a subtle amusement—he could have sworn it.

"Some day I—speak to you in—my own language," she promised, and the pink tongue flicked out over her lips, swiftly, hungrily.

Approaching footsteps on the red pavement interrupted Smith's reply. A dryland Martian came past, reeling a little and exuding an aroma of *segir*-whisky, the Venusian brand. When he caught the red flash of the girl's tatters he turned his head sharply, and as his *segir*-steeped brain took in the fact of her presence he lurched toward the recess unsteadily, bawling, "Shambleau, by *Pharol!* Shambleau!" and reached out a clutching hand.

Smith struck it aside contemptuously.

"On your way, drylander," he advised.

The man drew back and stared, bleary-eyed.

"Yours, eh?" he croaked. "*Zut!* You're welcome to it!" And like the ex-Patrolman before him he spat on the pavement and turned away, muttering harshly in the blasphemous tongue of the drylands.

Smith watched him shuffle off, and there was a crease between his colorless eyes, a nameless unease rising within him.

"Come on," he said abruptly to the girl. "If this sort of thing is going to happen we'd better get indoors. Where shall I take you?"

"With—you," she murmured.

He stared down into the flat green eyes. Those ceaselessly pulsing pupils disturbed him, but it seemed to him, vaguely, that behind the animal shallows

of her gaze was a shutter—a closed barrier that might at any moment open to reveal the very deeps of that dark knowledge he sensed there.

Roughly he said again, "Come on, then," and stepped down into the street.

She pattered along a pace or two behind him, making no effort to keep up with his long strides, and though Smith—as men know from Venus to Jupiter's moons—walks as softly as a cat, even in spaceman's boots, the girl at his heels slid like a shadow over the rough pavement, making so little sound that even the lightness of his footsteps was loud in the empty street.

Smith chose the less frequented ways of Lakkdarol, and somewhat shamefacedly thanked his nameless gods that his lodgings were not far away, for the few pedestrians he met turned and stared after the two with that by now familiar mingling of horror and contempt which he was as far as ever from understanding.

The room he had engaged was a single cubicle in a lodging-house on the edge of the city. Lakkdarol, raw camp-town that it was in those days, could have furnished little better anywhere within its limits, and Smith's errand there was not one he wished to advertise. He had slept in worse places than this before, and knew that he would do so again.

There was no one in sight when he entered, and the girl slipped up the stairs at his heels and vanished through the door, shadowy, unseen by anyone in the house. Smith closed the door and leaned his broad shoulders against the panels, regarding her speculatively.

She took in what little the room had to offer in a glance—frowsy bed, rickety table, mirror hanging unevenly and cracked against the wall, unpainted chairs—a typical camp-town room in an Earth settlement abroad. She accepted its poverty in that single glance, dismissed it, then crossed to the window and leaned out for a moment, gazing across the low roof-tops toward the barren countryside beyond, red slag under the late afternoon sun.

"You can stay here," said Smith abruptly, "until I leave town. I'm waiting here for a friend to come in from Venus. Have you eaten?"

"Yes," said the girl quickly. "I shall—need no—food for—a while."

"Well——" Smith glanced around the room. "I'll be in sometime tonight. You can go or stay just as you please. Better lock the door behind me."

With no more formality than that he left her. The door closed and he heard the key turn, and smiled to himself. He did not expect, then, ever to see her again.

He went down the steps and out into the late-slanting sunlight with a mind

so full of other matters that the brown girl receded very quickly into the background. Smith's errand in Lakkdarol, like most of his errands, is better not spoken of. Man lives as he must, and Smith's living was a perilous affair outside the law and ruled by the ray-gun only. It is enough to say that the shipping-port and its cargoes outbound interested him deeply just now, and that the friend he awaited was Yarol the Venusian, in that swift little Edsel ship the *Maid* that can flash from world to world with a derisive speed that laughs at Patrol boats and leaves pursuers floundering in the ether far behind. Smith and Yarol and the *Maid* were a trinity that had caused the Patrol leaders much worry and many gray hairs in the past, and the future looked very bright to Smith himself that evening as he left his lodging-house.

Lakkdarol roars by night, as Earthmen's camp-towns have a way of doing on every planet where Earth's outposts are, and it was beginning lustily as Smith went down among the awakening lights toward the center of town. His business there does not concern us. He mingled with the crowds where the lights were brightest, and there was the click of ivory counters and the jingle of silver, and red *segir* gurgled invitingly from black Venusian bottles, and much later Smith strolled homeward under the moving moons of Mars, and if the street wavered a little under his feet now and then—why, that is only understandable. Not even Smith could drink red *segir* at every bar from the *Martian Lamb* to the *New Chicago* and remain entirely steady on his feet. But he found his way back with very little difficulty—considering—and spent a good five minutes hunting for his key before he remembered he had left it in the inner lock for the girl.

He knocked then, and there was no sound of footsteps from within, but in a few moments the latch clicked and the door swung open. She retreated soundlessly before him as he entered, and took up her favorite place against the window, leaning back on the sill and outlined against the starry sky beyond. The room was in darkness.

Smith flipped the switch by the door and then leaned back against the panels, steadying himself. The cool night air had sobered him a little, and his head was clear enough—liquor went to Smith's feet, not his head, or he would never have come this far along the lawless way he had chosen. He lounged against the door now and regarded the girl in the sudden glare of the bulbs, blinding a little as much at the scarlet of her clothing as at the light.

"So you stayed," he said.

"I—waited," she answered softly, leaning farther back against the sill and

clasping the rough wood with slim, three-fingered hands, pale brown against the darkness.

"Why?"

She did not answer that, but her mouth curved into a slow smile. On a woman it would have been reply enough—provocative, daring. On Shambleau there was something pitiful and horrible in it—so human on the face of one half-animal. And yet . . . that sweet brown body curving so softly from the tatters of scarlet leather—the velvety texture of that brownness—the white-flashing smile. . . . Smith was aware of a stirring excitement within him. After all—time would be hanging heavy now until Yarol came. . . . Speculatively he allowed the steel-pale eyes to wander over her, with a slow regard that missed nothing. And when he spoke he was aware that his voice had deepened a little. . . .

"Come here," he said.

She came forward slowly, on bare clawed feet that made no slightest sound on the floor, and stood before him with downcast eyes and mouth trembling in that pitifully human smile. He took her by the shoulders—velvety soft shoulders, of a creamy smoothness that was not the texture of human flesh. A little tremor went over her, perceptibly, at the contact of his hands. Northwest Smith caught his breath suddenly and dragged her to him . . . sweet yielding brownness in the circle of his arms . . . heard her own breath catch and quicken as her velvety arms closed about his neck. And then he was looking down into her face, very near, and the green animal eyes met his with the pulsing pupils and the flicker of—something—deep behind their shallows—and through the rising clamor of his blood, even as he stooped his lips to hers, Smith felt something deep within him shudder away—inexplicable, instinctive, revolted. What it might be he had no words to tell, but the very touch of her was suddenly loathsome—so soft and velvet and unhuman—and it might have been an animal's face that lifted itself to his mouth—the dark knowledge looked hungrily from the darkness of those slit pupils—and for a mad instant he knew that same wild, feverish revulsion he had seen in the faces of the mob. . . .

"God!" he gasped, a far more ancient invocation against evil than he realized, then or ever, and he ripped her arms from his neck, swung her away with such a force that she reeled half across the room. Smith fell back against the door, breathing heavily, and stared at her while the wild revolt died slowly within him.

She had fallen to the floor beneath the window, and as she lay there against

the wall with bent head he saw, curiously, that her turban had slipped—the turban that he had been so sure covered baldness—and a lock of scarlet hair fell below the binding leather, hair as scarlet as her garment, as unhumanly red as her eyes were unhumanly green. He stared, and shook his head dizzily and stared again, for it seemed to him that the thick lock of crimson had moved, *squirmed* of itself against her cheek.

At the contact of it her hands flew up and she tucked it away with a very human gesture and then dropped her head again into her hands. And from the deep shadow of her fingers he thought she was staring up at him covertly.

Smith drew a deep breath and passed a hand across his forehead. The inexplicable moment had gone as quickly as it came—too swiftly for him to understand or analyze it. "Got to lay off the *segin*," he told himself unsteadily. Had he imagined that scarlet hair? After all, she was no more than a pretty brown girl-creature from one of the many half-human races peopling the planets. No more than that, after all. A pretty little thing, but animal. . . . He laughed a little shakily.

"No more of that," he said. "God knows I'm no angel, but there's got to be a limit somewhere. Here." He crossed to the bed and sorted out a pair of blankets from the untidy heap, tossing them to the far corner of the room. "You can sleep there."

Wordlessly she rose from the floor and began to rearrange the blankets, the uncomprehending resignation of the animal eloquent in every line of her.

Smith had a strange dream that night. He thought he had awakened to a room full of darkness and moonlight and moving shadows, for the nearer moon of Mars was racing through the sky and everything on the planet below her was endued with a restless life in the dark. And something . . . some nameless, unthinkable *thing* . . . was coiled about his throat . . . something like a soft snake, wet and warm. It lay loose and light about his neck . . . and it was moving gently, very gently, with a soft, caressive pressure that sent little thrills of delight through every nerve and fiber of him, a perilous delight—beyond physical pleasure, deeper than joy of the mind. That warm softness was caressing the very roots of his soul with a terrible intimacy. The ecstasy of it left him weak, and yet he knew—in a flash of knowledge born of this impossible dream—that the soul should not be handled. . . . And with that knowledge a horror broke upon him, turning the pleasure into a rapture of revulsion, hateful, horrible—but still most foully sweet. He tried to lift his hands and tear the dream-monstrosity from his throat—tried but half-

heartedly; for though his soul was revolted to its very deeps, yet the delight of his body was so great that his hands all but refused the attempt. But when at last he tried to lift his arms a cold shock went over him and he found that he could not stir . . . his body lay stony as marble beneath the blankets, a living marble that shuddered with a dreadful delight through every rigid vein.

The revulsion grew strong upon him as he struggled against the paralyzing dream—a struggle of soul against sluggish body—titanically, until the moving dark was streaked with blankness that clouded and closed about him at last and he sank back into the oblivion from which he had awakened.

Next morning, when the bright sunlight shining through Mars' clear thin air awakened him, Smith lay for a while trying to remember. The dream had been more vivid than reality, but he could not now quite recall . . . only that it had been more sweet and horrible than anything else in life. He lay puzzling for a while, until a soft sound from the corner aroused him from his thoughts and he sat up to see the girl lying in a cat-like coil on her blankets, watching him with round, grave eyes. He regarded her somewhat ruefully.

"Morning," he said. "I've just had the devil of a dream. . . . Well, hungry?"

She shook her head silently, and he could have sworn there was a covert gleam of strange amusement in her eyes.

He stretched and yawned, dismissing the nightmare temporarily from his mind.

"What am I going to do with you?" he inquired, turning to more immediate matters. "I'm leaving here in a day or two and I can't take you along, you know. Where'd you come from in the first place?"

Again she shook her head.

"Not telling? Well, it's your own business. You can stay here until I give up the room. From then on you'll have to do your own worrying."

He swung his feet to the floor and reached for his clothes.

Ten minutes later, slipping the heat-gun into its holster at his thigh, Smith turned to the girl. "There's food-concentrate in that box on the table. It ought to hold you until I get back. And you'd better lock the door again after I've gone."

Her wide, unwavering stare was his only answer, and he was not sure she had understood, but at any rate the lock clicked after him as before, and he went down the steps with a faint grin on his lips.

The memory of last night's extraordinary dream was slipping from him, as such memories do, and by the time he had reached the street the girl and the

dream and all of yesterday's happenings were blotted out by the sharp necessities of the present.

Again the intricate business that had brought him here claimed his attention. He went about it to the exclusion of all else, and there was a good reason behind everything he did from the moment he stepped out into the street until the time when he turned back again at evening; though had one chosen to follow him during the day his apparently aimless rambling through Lakkdarol would have seemed very pointless.

He must have spent two hours at the least idling by the space-port, watching with sleepy, colorless eyes the ships that came and went, the passengers, the vessels lying at wait, the cargoes—particularly the cargoes. He made the rounds of the town's saloons once more, consuming many glasses of varied liquors in the course of the day and engaging in idle conversation with men of all races and worlds, usually in their own languages, for Smith was a linguist of repute among his contemporaries. He heard the gossip of the spaceways, news from a dozen planets of a thousand different events. He heard the latest joke about the Venusian Emperor and the latest report on the Chino-Aryan war and the latest song hot from the lips of Rose Robertson, whom every man on the civilized planets adored as "the Georgia Rose." He passed the day quite profitably, for his own purposes, which do not concern us now, and it was not until late evening, when he turned homeward again, that the thought of the brown girl in his room took definite shape in his mind, though it had been lurking there, formless and submerged, all day.

He had no idea what comprised her usual diet, but he bought a can of New York roast beef and one of Venusian frog-broth and a dozen fresh canal-apples and two pounds of that Earth lettuce that grows so vigorously in the fertile canal-soil of Mars. He felt that she must surely find something to her liking in this broad variety of edibles, and—for his day had been very satisfactory—he hummed *The Green Hills of Earth* to himself in a surprisingly good baritone as he climbed the stairs.

The door was locked, as before, and he was reduced to kicking the lower panels gently with his boot, for his arms were full. She opened the door with that softness that was characteristic of her and stood regarding him in the semi-darkness as he stumbled to the table with his load. The room was unlit again.

"Why don't you turn on the lights?" he demanded irritably after he had barked his shin on the chair by the table in an effort to deposit his burden there.

"Light and—dark—they are alike—to me," she murmured.

"Cat eyes, eh? Well, you look the part. Here, I've brought you some dinner. Take your choice. Fond of roast beef? Or how about a little frog-broth?"

She shook her head and backed away a step.

"No," she said. "I can not—eat your food."

Smith's brows wrinkled. "Didn't you have any of the food-tablets?"

Again the red turban shook negatively.

"Then you haven't had anything for—why, more than twenty-four hours! You must be starved."

"Not hungry," she denied.

"What can I find for you to eat, then? There's time yet if I hurry. You've got to eat, child."

"I shall—eat," she said softly. "Before long—I shall—feed. Have no—worry."

She turned away then and stood at the window, looking out over the moonlit landscape as if to end the conversation. Smith cast her a puzzled glance as he opened the can of roast beef. There had been an odd undernote in that assurance that, undefinably, he did not like. And the girl had teeth and tongue and presumably a fairly human digestive system, to judge from her human form. It was nonsense for her to pretend that he could find nothing that she could eat. She must have had some of the food concentrate after all, he decided, prying up the thermos lid of the inner container to release the long-sealed savor of the hot meat inside.

"Well, if you won't eat you won't," he observed philosophically as he poured hot broth and diced beef into the dish-like lid of the thermos can and extracted the spoon from its hiding-place between the inner and outer receptacles. She turned a little to watch him as he pulled up a rickety chair and sat down to the food, and after a while the realization that her green gaze was fixed so unwinkingly upon him made the man nervous, and he said between bites of creamy canal-apple, "Why don't you try a little of this? It's good."

"The food—I eat is—better," her soft voice told him in its hesitant murmur, and again he felt rather than heard a faint undernote of unpleasantness in the words. A sudden suspicion struck him as he pondered on that last remark—some vague memory of horror-tales told about campfires in the past—and he swung round in the chair to look at her, a tiny, creeping fear unaccountably arising. There had been that in her words—in her unspoken words, that menaced. . . .

She stood up beneath his gaze demurely, wide green eyes with their pulsing

pupils meeting his without a falter. But her mouth was scarlet and her teeth were sharp. . . .

"What food do you eat?" he demanded. And then, after a pause, very softly, "Blood?"

She stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending; then something like amusement curled her lips and she said scornfully, "You think me—vampire, eh? No—I am Shambleau!"

Unmistakably there were scorn and amusement in her voice at the suggestion, but as unmistakably she knew what he meant—accepted it as a logical suspicion—vampires! Fairy-tales—but fairy-tales this unhuman, outland creature was most familiar with. Smith was not a credulous man, nor a superstitious one, but he had seen too many strange things himself to doubt that the wildest legend might have a basis of fact. And there was something namelessly strange about her. . . .

He puzzled over it for a while between deep bites of the canal-apple. And though he wanted to question her about a great many things, he did not, for he knew how futile it would be.

He said nothing more until the meat was finished and another canal-apple had followed the first, and he had cleared away the meal by the simple expedient of tossing the empty can out of the window. Then he lay back in the chair and surveyed her from half-closed eyes, colorless in a face tanned like saddle-leather. And again he was conscious of the brown, soft curves of her, velvety—subtle arcs and planes of smooth flesh under the tatters of scarlet leather. Vampire she might be, unhuman she certainly was, but desirable beyond words as she sat submissive beneath his slow regard, her red-turbaned head bent, her clawed fingers lying in her lap. They sat very still for a while, and the silence throbbed between them.

She was so like a woman—an Earth woman—sweet and submissive and demure, and softer than soft fur, if he could forget the three-fingered claws and the pulsing eyes—and that deeper strangeness beyond words. . . . (Had he dreamed that red lock of hair that moved? Had it been *segir* that woke the wild revulsion he knew when he held her in his arms? Why had the mob so thirsted for her?) He sat and stared, and despite the mystery of her and the half-suspicions that thronged his mind—for she was so beautifully soft and curved under those revealing tatters—he slowly realized that his pulses were mounting, became aware of a kindling within . . . brown girl-creature with downcast eyes . . . and then the lids lifted and the green flatness of a cat's gaze met his, and last night's revulsion woke swiftly again, like a warn-

ing bell that clanged as their eyes met—animal, after all, too sleek and soft for humanity, and that inner strangeness. . . .

Smith shrugged and sat up. His failings were legion, but the weakness of the flesh was not among the major ones. He motioned the girl to her pallet of blankets in the corner and turned to his own bed.

From deeps of sound sleep he awoke much later. He awoke suddenly and completely, and with that inner excitement that presages something momentous. He awoke to brilliant moonlight, turning the room so bright that he could see the scarlet of the girl's rags as she sat up on her pallet. She was awake, she was sitting with her shoulder half turned to him and her head bent, and some warning instinct crawled coldly up his spine as he watched what she was doing. And yet it was a very ordinary thing for a girl to do—any girl, anywhere. She was unbinding her turban. . . .

He watched, not breathing, a presentiment of something horrible stirring in his brain, inexplicably. . . . The red folds loosened, and—he knew then that he had not dreamed—again a scarlet lock swung down against her cheek . . . a hair, was it? a lock of hair? . . . thick as a thick worm it fell, plumply, against that smooth cheek . . . more scarlet than blood and thick as a crawling worm . . . and like a worm it crawled.

Smith rose on an elbow, not realizing the motion, and fixed an unwinking stare, with a sort of sick, fascinated incredulity, on that—that lock of hair. He had not dreamed. Until now he had taken it for granted that it was the *segir* which had made it seem to move on that evening before. But now . . . it was lengthening, stretching, moving of itself. It must be hair, but it *crawled*; with a sickening life of its own it squirmed down against her cheek, caressingly, revoltingly, impossibly. . . . Wet, it was, and round and thick and shining. . . .

She unfastened the last fold and whipped the turban off. From what he saw then Smith would have turned his eyes away—and he had looked on dreadful things before, without flinching—but he could not stir. He could only lie there on his elbow staring at the mass of scarlet, squirming—worms, hairs, what?—that writhed over her head in a dreadful mockery of ringlets. And it was lengthening, falling, somehow growing before his eyes, down over her shoulders in a spilling cascade, a mass that even at the beginning could never have been hidden under the skull-tight turban she had worn. He was beyond wondering, but he realized that. And still it squirmed and lengthened and fell, and she shook it out in a horrible travesty of a woman shaking out

her unbound hair—until the unspeakable tangle of it—twisting, writhing, obscenely scarlet—hung to her waist and beyond, and still lengthened, an endless mass of crawling horror that until now, somehow, impossibly, had been hidden under the tight-bound turban. It was like a nest of blind, restless red worms . . . it was—it was like naked entrails endowed with an unnatural aliveness, terrible beyond words.

Smith lay in the shadows, frozen without and within in a sick numbness that came of utter shock and revulsion.

She shook out the obscene, unspeakable tangle over her shoulders, and somehow he knew that she was going to turn in a moment and that he must meet her eyes. The thought of that meeting stopped his heart with dread, more awfully than anything else in this nightmare horror; for nightmare it must be, surely. But he knew without trying that he could not wrench his eyes away—the sickened fascination of that sight held him motionless, and somehow there was a certain beauty. . . .

Her head was turning. The crawling awfulnesses rippled and squirmed at the motion, writhing thick and wet and shining over the soft brown shoulders about which they fell now in obscene cascades that all but hid her body. Her head was turning. Smith lay numb. And very slowly he saw the round of her cheek foreshorten and her profile come into view, all the scarlet horrors twisting ominously, and the profile shortened in turn and her full face came slowly round toward the bed—moonlight shining brilliantly as day on the pretty girl-face, demure and sweet, framed in tangled obscenity that crawled. . . .

The green eyes met his. He felt a perceptible shock, and a shudder rippled down his paralyzed spine, leaving an icy numbness in its wake. He felt the goose-flesh rising. But that numbness and cold horror he scarcely realized, for the green eyes were locked with his in a long, long look that somehow presaged nameless things—not altogether unpleasant things—the voiceless voice of her mind assailing him with little murmurous promises. . . .

For a moment he went down into a blind abyss of submission; and then somehow the very sight of that obscenity in eyes that did not then realize they saw it, was dreadful enough to draw him out of the seductive darkness . . . the sight of her crawling and alive with unnamable horror.

She rose, and down about her in a cascade fell the squirming scarlet of—of what grew upon her head. It fell in a long, alive cloak to her bare feet on the floor, hiding her in a wave of dreadful, wet, writhing life. She put up her hands and like a swimmer she parted the waterfall of it, tossing the masses

back over her shoulders to reveal her own brown body, sweetly curved. She smiled exquisitely, and in starting waves back from her forehead and down about her in a hideous background writhed the snaky wetness of her living tresses. And Smith knew that he looked upon Medusa.

The knowledge of that—the realization of vast backgrounds reaching into misted history—shook him out of his frozen horror for a moment, and in that moment he met her eyes again, smiling, green as glass in the moonlight, half hooded under drooping lids. Through the twisting scarlet she held out her arms. And there was something soul-shakingly desirable about her, so that all the blood surged to his head suddenly and he stumbled to his feet like a sleeper in a dream as she swayed toward him, infinitely graceful, infinitely sweet in her cloak of living horror.

And somehow there was beauty in it, the wet scarlet writhings with moonlight sliding and shining along the thick, worm-round tresses and losing itself in the masses only to glint again and move silvery along writhing tendrils—an awful, shuddering beauty more dreadful than any ugliness could be.

But all this, again, he but half realized, for the insidious murmur was coiling again through his brain, promising, caressing, alluring, sweeter than honey; and the green eyes that held his were clear and burning like the depths of a jewel, and behind the pulsing slits of darkness he was staring into a greater dark that held all things. . . . He had known—dimly he had known when he first gazed into those flat animal shallows that behind them lay this—all beauty and terror, all horror and delight, in the infinite darkness upon which her eyes opened like windows, paned with emerald glass.

Her lips moved, and in a murmur that blended indistinguishably with the silence and the sway of her body and the dreadful sway of her—her hair—she whispered—very softly, very passionately, "I shall—speak to you now—in my own tongue—oh, beloved!"

And in her living cloak she swayed to him, the murmur swelling seductive and caressing in his innermost brain—promising, compelling, sweeter than sweet. His flesh crawled to the horror of her, but it was a perverted revulsion that clasped what it loathed. His arms slid round her under the sliding cloak, wet, wet and warm and hideously alive—and the sweet velvet body was clinging to his, her arms locked about his neck—and with a whisper and a rush the unspeakable horror closed about them both.

In nightmares until he died he remembered that moment when the living tresses of Shambleau first folded him in their embrace. A nauseous, smothering

odor as the wetness shut around him—thick, pulsing worms clasp every inch of his body, sliding, writhing, their wetness and warmth striking through his garments as if he stood naked to their embrace.

All this in a graven instant—and after that a tangled flash of conflicting sensation before oblivion closed over him. For he remembered the dream—and knew it for nightmare reality now, and the sliding, gently moving caresses of those wet, warm worms upon his flesh was an ecstasy above words—that deeper ecstasy that strikes beyond the body and beyond the mind and tickles the very roots of the soul with unnatural delight. So he stood, rigid as marble, as helplessly stony as any of Medusa's victims in ancient legends were, while the terrible pleasure of Shambleau thrilled and shuddered through every fiber of him; through every atom of his body and the intangible atoms of what men call the soul, through all that was Smith the dreadful pleasure ran. And it was truly dreadful. Dimly he knew it, even as his body answered to the root-deep ecstasy, a foul and dreadful wooing from which his very soul shuddered away—and yet in the innermost depths of that soul some grinning traitor shivered with delight. But deeply, behind all this, he knew horror and revulsion and despair beyond telling, while the intimate caresses crawled obscenely in the secret places of his soul—knew that the soul should not be handled—and shook with the perilous pleasure through it all.

And this conflict and knowledge, this mingling of rapture and revulsion all took place in the flashing of a moment while the scarlet worms coiled and crawled upon him, sending deep, obscene tremors of that infinite pleasure into every atom that made up Smith. And he could not stir in that slimy, ecstatic embrace—and a weakness was flooding that grew deeper after each succeeding wave of intense delight, and the traitor in his soul strengthened and drowned out the revulsion—and something within him ceased to struggle as he sank wholly into a blazing darkness that was oblivion to all else but that devouring rapture. . . .

The young Venusian climbing the stairs to his friend's lodging-room pulled out his key absent-mindedly, a pucker forming between his fine brows. He was slim, as all Venusians are, as fair and sleek as any of them, and as with most of his countrymen the look of cherubic innocence on his face was wholly deceptive. He had the face of a fallen angel, without Lucifer's majesty to redeem it; for a black devil grinned in his eyes and there were faint lines of ruthlessness and dissipation about his mouth to tell of the long years behind

him that had run the gamut of experiences and made his name, next to Smith's, the most hated and the most respected in the records of the Patrol.

He mounted the stairs now with a puzzled frown between his eyes. He had come into Lakkdarol on the noon liner—the *Maid* in her hold very skillfully disguised with paint and otherwise—to find in lamentable disorder the affairs he had expected to be settled. And cautious inquiry elicited the information that Smith had not been seen for three days. That was not like his friend—he had never failed before, and the two stood to lose not only a large sum of money but also their personal safety by the inexplicable lapse on the part of Smith. Yarol could think of one solution only: fate had at last caught up with his friend. Nothing but physical disability could explain it.

Still puzzling, he fitted his key in the lock and swung the door open.

In that first moment, as the door opened, he sensed something very wrong. . . . The room was darkened, and for a while he could see nothing, but at the first breath he scented a strange, unnamable odor, half sickening, half sweet. And deep stirrings of ancestral memory awoke within him—ancient swamp-born memories from Venusian ancestors far away and long ago. . . .

Yarol laid his hand on his gun, lightly, and opened the door wider. In the dimness all he could see at first was a curious mound in the far corner. . . . Then his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, and he saw it more clearly, a mound that somehow heaved and stirred within itself. . . . A mound of—he caught his breath sharply—a mound like a mass of entrails, living, moving, writhing with an unspeakable aliveness. Then a hot Venusian oath broke from his lips and he cleared the door-sill in a swift stride, slammed the door and set his back against it, gun ready in his hand, although his flesh crawled—for he *knew*. . . .

"Smith!" he said softly, in a voice thick with horror. "Northwest!"

The moving mass stirred—shuddered—sank back into crawling quiescence again.

"Smith! Smith!" The Venusian's voice was gentle and insistent, and it quivered a little with terror.

An impatient ripple went over the whole mass of aliveness in the corner. It stirred again, reluctantly, and then tendril by writhing tendril it began to part itself and fall aside, and very slowly the brown of a spaceman's leather appeared beneath it, all slimed and shining.

"Smith! Northwest!" Yarol's persistent whisper came again, urgently, and with a dream-like slowness the leather garments moved . . . a man sat up in the midst of the writhing worms, a man who once, long ago, might have

been Northwest Smith. From head to foot he was slimy from the embrace of the crawling horror about him. His face was that of some creature beyond humanity—dead-alive, fixed in a gray stare, and the look of terrible ecstasy that overspread it seemed to come from somewhere far within, a faint reflection from immeasurable distances beyond the flesh. And as there is mystery and magic in the moonlight which is after all but a reflection of the everyday sun, so in that gray face turned to the door was a terror unnamable and sweet, a reflection of ecstasy beyond the understanding of any who have known only earthly ecstasy themselves. And as he sat there turning a blank, eyeless face to Yarol the red worms writhed ceaselessly about him, very gently, with a soft, caressive motion that never slackened.

"Smith . . . come here! Smith . . . get up . . . Smith, Smith!" Yarol's whisper hissed in the silence, commanding, urgent—but he made no move to leave the door.

And with a dreadful slowness, like a dead man rising, Smith stood up in the nest of slimy scarlet. He swayed drunkenly on his feet, and two or three crimson tendrils came writhing up his legs to the knees and wound themselves there, supportingly, moving with a ceaseless caress that seemed to give him some hidden strength, for he said then, without inflection,

"Go away. Go away. Leave me alone." And the dead ecstatic face never changed.

"Smith!" Yarol's voice was desperate. "Smith, listen! Smith, can't you hear me?"

"Go away," the monotonous voice said. "Go away. Go away. Go——"

"Not unless you come too. Can't you hear? Smith! Smith! I'll——"

He hushed in mid-phrase, and once more the ancestral prickle of race-memory shivered down his back, for the scarlet mass was moving again, violently, rising. . . .

Yarol pressed back against the door and gripped his gun, and the name of a god he had forgotten years ago rose to his lips unbidden. For he knew what was coming next, and the knowledge was more dreadful than any ignorance could have been.

The red, writhing mass rose higher, and the tendrils parted and a human face looked out—no, half human, with green cat-eyes that shone in that dimness like lighted jewels, compellingly. . . .

Yarol breathed "Shar!" again, and flung up an arm across his face, and the

tingle of meeting that green gaze for even an instant went thrilling through him perilously.

"Smith!" he called in despair. "Smith, can't you hear me?"

"Go away," said that voice that was not Smith's. "Go away."

And somehow, although he dared not look, Yarol knew that the—the other—had parted those worm-thick tresses and stood there in all the human sweetness of the brown, curved woman's body, cloaked in living horror. And he felt the eyes upon him, and something was crying insistently in his brain to lower that shielding arm. . . . He was lost—he knew it, and the knowledge gave him that courage which comes from despair. The voice in his brain was growing, swelling, deafening him with a roaring command that all but swept him before it—command to lower that arm—to meet the eyes that opened upon darkness—to submit—and a promise, murmurous and sweet and evil beyond words, of pleasure to come. . . .

But somehow he kept his head—somehow, dizzily, he was gripping his gun in his upflung hand—somehow, incredibly, crossing the narrow room with averted face, groping for Smith's shoulder. There was a moment of blind fumbling in emptiness, and then he found it, and gripped the leather that was slimy and dreadful and wet—and simultaneously he felt something loop gently about his ankle and a shock of repulsive pleasure went through him, and then another coil, and another, wound about his feet. . . .

Yarol set his teeth and gripped the shoulder hard, and his hand shuddered of itself, for the feel of that leather was slimy as the worms about his ankles, and a faint tingle of obscene delight went through him from the contact.

That caressive pressure on his legs was all he could feel, and the voice in his brain drowned out all other sounds, and his body obeyed him reluctantly—but somehow he gave one heave of tremendous effort and swung Smith, stumbling, out of that nest of horror. The twining tendrils ripped loose with a little sucking sound, and the whole mass quivered and reached after, and then Yarol forgot his friend utterly and turned his whole being to the hopeless task of freeing himself. For only a part of him was fighting, now—only a part of him struggled against the twining obscenities, and in his innermost brain the sweet, seductive murmur sounded, and his body clamored to surrender. . . .

"*Shar! Shar y'danis . . . Shar mor'la-rol—*" prayed Yarol, gasping and half unconscious that he spoke, boy's prayers that he had forgotten years ago, and with his back half turned to the central mass he kicked desperately with his heavy boots at the red, writhing worms about him. They gave back before

him, quivering and curling themselves out of reach, and though he knew that more were reaching for his throat from behind, at least he could go on struggling until he was forced to meet those eyes. . . .

He stamped and kicked and stamped again, and for one instant he was free of the slimy grip as the bruised worms curled back from his heavy feet, and he lurched away dizzily, sick with revulsion and despair as he fought off the coils, and then he lifted his eyes and saw the cracked mirror on the wall. Dimly in its reflection he could see the writhing scarlet horror behind him, cat face peering out with its demure girl-smile, dreadfully human, and all the red tendrils reaching after him. And remembrance of something he had read long ago swept incongruously over him, and the gasp of relief and hope that he gave shook for a moment the grip of the command in his brain.

Without pausing for a breath he swung the gun over his shoulder, the reflected barrel in line with the reflected horror in the mirror, and flicked the catch.

In the mirror he saw its blue flame leap in a dazzling spate across the dimness, full into the midst of that squirming, reaching mass behind him. There was a hiss and a blaze and a high, thin scream of inhuman malice and despair—the flame cut a wide arc and went out as the gun fell from his hand, and Yarol pitched forward to the floor.

Northwest Smith opened his eyes to Martian sunlight streaming thinly through the dingy window. Something wet and cold was slapping his face, and the familiar fiery sting of *segir*-whisky burnt his throat.

"Smith!" Yarol's voice was saying from far away. "N. W.! Wake up, damn you! Wake up!"

"I'm—awake," Smith managed to articulate thickly. "Wha's matter?"

Then a cup-rim was thrust against his teeth and Yarol said irritably, "Drink it, you fool!"

Smith swallowed obediently and more of the fire-hot *segir* flowed down his grateful throat. It spread a warmth through his body that awakened him from the numbness that had gripped him until now, and helped a little toward driving out the all-devouring weakness he was becoming aware of slowly. He lay still for a few minutes while the warmth of the whisky went through him, and memory sluggishly began to permeate his brain with the spread of the *segir*. Nightmare memories . . . sweet and terrible . . . memories of—

"God!" gasped Smith suddenly, and tried to sit up. Weakness smote him like a blow, and for an instant the room wheeled as he fell back against something firm and warm—Yarol's shoulder. The Venusian's arm supported him while

the room steadied, and after a while he twisted a little and stared into the other's black gaze.

Yarol was holding him with one arm and finishing the mug of *segir* himself, and the black eyes met his over the rim and crinkled into sudden laughter, half hysterical after that terror that was passed.

"By *Pharol*!" gasped Yarol, choking into his mug. "By *Pharol*, N. W.! I'm never gonna let you forget this! Next time you have to drag me out of a mess I'll say——"

"Let it go," said Smith. "What's been going on? How——"

"Shambleau." Yarol's laughter died. "Shambleau! What were you doing with a thing like that?"

"What was it?" Smith asked soberly.

"Mean to say you didn't know? But where'd you find it? How——"

"Suppose you tell me first what you know," said Smith firmly. "And another swig of that *segir*, too, please. I need it."

"Can you hold the mug now? Feel better?"

"Yeah—some. I can hold it—thanks. Now go on."

"Well—I don't know just where to start. They call them Shambleau——"

"Good God, is there more than one?"

"It's a—a sort of race, I think, one of the very oldest. Where they come from nobody knows. The name sounds a little French, doesn't it? But it goes back beyond the start of history. There have always been Shambleau."

"I never heard of 'em."

"Not many people have. And those who know don't care to talk about it much."

"Well, half this town knows. I hadn't any idea what they were talking about, then. And I still don't understand, but——"

"Yes, it happens like this, sometimes. They'll appear, and the news will spread and the town will get together and hunt them down, and after that—well, the story doesn't get around very far. It's too—too unbelievable."

"But—my God, Yarol!—what was it? Where'd it come from? How——"

"Nobody knows just where they come from. Another planet—maybe some undiscovered one. Some say Venus—I know there are some rather awful legends of them handed down in our family—that's how I've heard about it. And the minute I opened that door, awhile back—I—I think I knew that smell. . . ."

"But—what *are* they?"

"God knows. Not human, though they have the human form. Or that may

be only an illusion . . . or maybe I'm crazy. I don't know. They're a species of the vampire—or maybe the vampire is a species of—of them. Their normal form must be that—that mass, and in that form they draw nourishment from the—I suppose the life-forces of men. And they take some form—usually a woman form, I think, and key you up to the highest pitch of emotion before they—begin. That's to work the life-force up to intensity so it'll be easier. . . . And they give, always, that horrible, foul pleasure as they—feed. There are some men who, if they survive the first experience, take to it like a drug—can't give it up—keep the thing with them all their lives—which isn't long—feeding it for that ghastly satisfaction. Worse than smoking *ming* or—or 'praying to *Pharol*.'

"Yes," said Smith. "I'm beginning to understand why that crowd was so surprised and—and disgusted when I said—well, never mind. Go on."

"Did you get to talk to—to it?" asked Yarol.

"I tried to. It couldn't speak very well. I asked it where it came from and it said—'from far away and long ago'—something like that."

"I wonder. Possibly some unknown planet—but I think not. You know there are so many wild stories with some basis of fact to start from, that I've sometimes wondered—mightn't there be a lot more of even worse and wilder superstitions we've never even heard of? Things like this, blasphemous and foul, that those who know have to keep still about? Awful, fantastic things running around loose that we never hear rumors of at all!

"These things—they've been in existence for countless ages. No one knows when or where they first appeared. Those who've seen them, as we saw this one, don't talk about it. It's just one of those vague, misty rumors you find half hinted at in old books sometimes. . . . I believe they are an older race than man, spawned from ancient seed in times before ours, perhaps on planets that have gone to dust, and so horrible to man that when they are discovered the discoverers keep still about it—forget them again as quickly as they can.

"And they go back to time immemorial. I suppose you recognized the legend of Medusa? There isn't any question that the ancient Greeks knew of them. Does it mean that there have been civilizations before yours that set out from Earth and explored other planets? Or did one of the Shambleau somehow make its way into Greece three thousand years ago? If you think about it long enough you'll go off your head! I wonder how many other legends are based on things like this—things we don't suspect, things we'll never know.

"The Gorgon, Medusa, a beautiful woman with—with snakes for hair, and a gaze that turned men to stone, and Perseus finally killed her—I remembered

this just by accident, N. W., and it saved your life and mine—Perseus killed her by using a mirror as he fought to reflect what he dared not look at directly. I wonder what the old Greek who first started that legend would have thought if he'd known that three thousand years later his story would save the lives of two men on another planet. I wonder what that Greek's own story was, and how he met the thing, and what happened. . . .

"Well, there's a lot we'll never know. Wouldn't the records of that race of—of *things*, whatever they are, be worth reading! Records of other planets and other ages and all the beginnings of mankind! But I don't suppose they've kept any records. I don't suppose they've even any place to keep them—from what little I know, or anyone knows about it, they're like the Wandering Jew, just bobbing up here and there at long intervals, and where they stay in the meantime I'd give my eyes to know! But I don't believe that terribly hypnotic power they have indicates any superhuman intelligence. It's their means of getting food—just like a frog's long tongue or a carnivorous flower's odor. Those are physical because the frog and the flower eat physical food. The Shambleau uses a—*a* mental reach to get mental food. I don't quite know how to put it. And just as a beast that eats the bodies of other animals acquires with each meal greater power over the bodies of the rest, so the Shambleau, stoking itself up with the life-forces of men, increases its power over the minds and the souls of other men. But I'm talking about things I can't define—things I'm not sure exist.

"I only know that when I felt—when those tentacles closed around my legs—I didn't want to pull loose, I felt sensations that—that—oh, I'm fouled and filthy to the very deepest part of me by that—pleasure—and yet—"

"I know," said Smith slowly. The effect of the *segir* was beginning to wear off, and weakness was washing back over him in waves, and when he spoke he was half meditating in a low voice, scarcely realizing that Yarol listened. "I know it—much better than you do—and there's something so indescribably awful that the thing emanates, something so utterly at odds with everything human—there aren't any words to say it. For a while I was a part of it, literally, sharing its thoughts and memories and emotions and hungers, and—well, it's over now and I don't remember very clearly, but the only part left free was that part of me that was all but insane from the—the obscenity of the thing. And yet it was a pleasure so sweet—I think there must be some nucleus of utter evil in me—in everyone—that needs only the proper stimulus to get complete control; because even while I was sick all through from the touch of those—things—there was something in me that was—was simply gibbering

with delight. . . . Because of that, I saw things—and knew things—horrible, wild things I can't quite remember—visited unbelievable places, looked backward through the memory of that—creature—I was one with, and saw—God, I wish I could remember!"

"You ought to thank your God you can't," said Yarol soberly.

His voice roused Smith from the half-trance he had fallen into, and he rose on his elbow, swaying a little from weakness. The room was wavering before him, and he closed his eyes, not to see it, but he asked, "You say they—they don't turn up again? No way of finding—another?"

Yarol did not answer for a moment. He laid his hands on the other man's shoulders and pressed him back, and then sat staring down into the dark, ravaged face with a new, strange, undefinable look upon it that he had never seen there before—whose meaning he knew, too well.

"Smith," he said finally, and his black eyes for once were steady and serious, and the little grinning devil had vanished from behind them, "Smith, I've never asked your word on anything before, but I've—I've earned the right to do it now, and I'm asking you to promise me one thing."

Smith's colorless eyes met the black gaze unsteadily. Irresolution was in them, and a little fear of what that promise might be. And for just a moment Yarol was looking, not into his friend's familiar eyes, but into a wide gray blankness that held all horror and delight—a pale sea with unspeakable pleasures sunk beneath it. Then the wide stare focused again and Smith's eyes met his squarely and Smith's voice said, "Go ahead. I'll promise."

"That if you ever should meet a Shambleau again—ever, anywhere—you'll draw your gun and burn it to hell the instant you realize what it is. Will you promise me that?"

There was a long silence. Yarol's somber black eyes bored relentlessly into the colorless ones of Smith, not wavering. And the veins stood out on Smith's tanned forehead. He never broke his word—he had given it perhaps half a dozen times in his life, but once he had given it, he was incapable of breaking it. And once more the gray seas flooded in a dim tide of memories, sweet and horrible beyond dreams. Once more Yarol was staring into blankness that hid nameless things. The room was very still.

The gray tide ebbed. Smith's eyes, pale and resolute as steel, met Yarol's levelly.

"I'll—try," he said. And his voice wavered.

The Curse of a Thousand Kisses

by Sax Rohmer

Fu Manchu has become one of the small band of literary beings, like Sherlock Holmes and Tarzan of the Apes, to achieve world-wide immortality and familiarity. The books of Sax Rohmer, creator of the insidious Asiatic doctor, have brought to millions the breath of the mysterious Orient, the legend-haunted, incense-filled atmosphere of the oldest civilizations of Man. The short story we have chosen to reprint is one of Sax Rohmer's least known tales, yet it is one that the author himself once designated as his favorite. An unforgettable legend out of Egypt, this is the first time in very many years that it has been brought back to the American public.



INTRODUCTORY

S AVILLE GRAINGER will long be remembered by the public as a brilliant journalist and by his friends as a confirmed misogynist. His distaste for the society of women amounted to a mania, and to Grainger a pretty face was like a red rag to a bull. This was all the more extraordinary and, for Grainger, more painful, because he was one of the most handsome men I ever knew—very dark, with wonderful flashing eyes and the features of an early Roman—or, as I have since thought, of an aristocratic Oriental; aquiline, clean-cut, and swarthy. At any mixed gathering at which he appeared, women gravitated in his direction as though he possessed some magnetic attraction for the sex; and Grainger invariably bolted.

His extraordinary end—never explained to this day—will be remembered by some of those who read of it; but so much that affected whole continents has occurred in the interval that to the majority of the public the circumstances will no longer be familiar. It created a considerable stir in Cairo at the time, as was only natural, but when the missing man failed to return, the nine days' wonder of his disappearance was forgotten in the excitement of some new story or another.

Briefly, Grainger, who was recuperating at Mena House after a rather severe illness in London, went out one evening for a stroll, wearing a light dust-coat over his evening clothes and smoking a cigarette. He turned in the direction of the Great Pyramid—and never came back. That is the story in its bald entirety. No one has ever seen him since—or ever reported having seen him.

If the following story is an elaborate hoax—perpetrated by Grainger himself, for some obscure reason remaining in hiding, or by another well acquainted with his handwriting—I do not profess to say. As to how it came into my possession, that may be told very briefly. Two years after Grainger's disappearance I was in Cairo, and although I was not staying at Mena House I sometimes visited friends there. One night as I came out of the hotel to enter the car which was to drive me back to the Continental, a tall native, dressed in white and so muffled up that little more of his face than two gleaming eyes was visible, handed me a packet—a roll of paper, apparently—saluted me with extraordinary formality, and departed.

No one else seemed to have noticed the man, although the chauffeur, of course, was nearly as close to him as I was, and a servant from the hotel had followed me out and down the steps. I stood there in the dusk, staring at the packet in my hand and then after the tall figure—already swallowed up in the shadow of the road. Naturally I assumed that the man had made some mistake, and holding the package near the lamp of the car I examined it closely.

It was a roll of some kind of parchment, tied with a fragment of thin string, and upon the otherwise blank outside page my name was written very distinctly!

I entered the car, rather dazed by the occurrence, which presented several extraordinary features, and, unfastening the string, began to read. Then, in real earnest, I thought I must be dreaming. Since I append the whole of the manuscript I will make no further reference to the contents here, but will content myself with mentioning that it was written—with dark-brown ink—in Saville Grainger's unmistakable hand upon some kind of parchment or papyrus which has defied three different experts to whom I have shown it, but which, in short, is of unknown manufacture. The twine with which it was tied proved to be of finely plaited reed.

That part of Grainger's narrative, if the following amazing statement is really the work of Grainger, which deals with events up to the time that he left Mena House—and the world—I have been able to check. The dragoman,

Hassan Abd-el-Kebir, was still practising his profession at Mena House at the time of my visit, and he confirmed the truth of Grainger's story in regard to the heart of lapis-lazuli, which he had seen, and the meeting with the old woman in the Mûski—of which Grainger had spoken to him.

For the rest, the manuscript shall tell Grainger's story.

THE MANUSCRIPT

I

Two years have elapsed since I quitted the world, and the presence in Egypt of a one-time colleague, of which I have been advised, prompts me to put on record these particulars of the strangest, most wonderful, and most beautiful experience which has ever befallen any man. I do not expect my story to be believed. The scepticism of the material world of Fleet Street will consume my statement with its devouring fires. But I do not care. The old itching to make a "story" is upon me. As a "story" let this paper be regarded.

Where the experience actually began I must leave each reader to judge for himself. I, personally, do not profess to know, even now. But the curtain first arose upon that part of the story which it is my present purpose to chronicle one afternoon near the corner of the Street of the Silversmiths in Cairo. I was wandering in those wonderful narrow, winding lanes, unaccompanied, for I am by habit a solitary being; and despite my ignorance of the language and customs of the natives I awakened to the fact that a link of sympathy—of silent understanding—seemed to bind me to these busy brown men.

I had for many years cherished a secret ambition to pay a protracted visit to Egypt, but the ties of an arduous profession hitherto had rendered its realisation impossible. Now, a stranger in a strange land, I found myself *at home*. I cannot hope to make evident to my readers the completeness of this recognition. From Shepherd's, with its throngs of cosmopolitan travellers and its hosts of pretty women, I had early fled, in dismay to the comparative quiet of Mena House. But the only real happiness I ever knew—indeed, as I soon began to realise, had ever known—I found among the discordant cries and mingled smells of perfume and decay in the native city. The desert called to me sweetly, but it was the people, the shops, the shuttered houses, the noise and the smells of the Eastern streets which gripped my heart.

Delightedly I watched the passage of those commercial vehicles, narrow and set high upon monstrous wheels, which convey loads of indescribable variety along streets no wider than the "hall" of a small suburban residence. The

Parsees in the Khan Khalil with their carpets and shining silk-ware, the Arab dealers, fierce swarthy tradesmen from the desert, and the smooth-tongued Cairenes upholding embroidered cloths and gauzy *yashmaks* to allure the eye—all these I watched with a kind of gladness that was almost tender, that was unlike any sentiment I had ever experienced toward my fellow-creatures before.

Mendicants crying the eternal "*Bakshish!*", *Sakhas* with their skins of Nile water, and the other hundred and one familiar figures of the quarter filled me with a great and glad contentment.

I purposely haunted the Mûski during the heat of the day because at that hour it was comparatively free from the presence of Europeans and Americans. Thus, on the occasion of which I write, coming to the end of the street in which the shops of the principal silversmiths are situated, I found myself to be the only white man (if I except the Greeks) in the immediate neighbourhood.

A group of men hurrying out of the street as I approached it first attracted my attention. They were glancing behind them apprehensively as though at a rabid dog. Then came a white-bearded man riding a tiny donkey and also glancing back apprehensively over his shoulder. He all but collided with me in his blind haste; and, stepping quickly aside to avoid him, I knocked down an old woman who was coming out of the street.

The man who had been the real cause of the accident rode off at headlong speed and I found myself left with the poor victim of my clumsiness in a spot which seemed miraculously to have become deserted. If the shopkeepers remained in their shops, they were invisible, and must have retreated into the darkest corners of the caves in the wall which constitute native emporiums. Pedestrians there were none.

I stooped to the old woman, who lay moaning at my feet . . . and as I did so, I shrank. How can I describe the loathing, the repulsion which I experienced? Never in the whole of my career had I seen such a hideous face. A ragged black veil which she wore had been torn from its brass fastenings as she fell, and her countenance was revealed in all its appalling ugliness. Yellow, shrivelled, toothless, it was scarcely human; but above all, it repelled because of its aspect of *extreme age*. I do not mean that it was like the face of a woman of eighty; it was like that of a woman who had miraculously survived deacease for several centuries! It was a witch-face, a deathly face.

And as I shrank, she opened her eyes, moaning feebly, and groping with claw-like hands as if darkness surrounded her. Furthermore I saw a new pain,

and a keener pain, light up those aged eyes. She had detected my involuntary movement of loathing.

Those who knew me will bear testimony to the fact that I was not an emotional man or one readily impressionable by any kind of human appeal. Therefore they will wonder the more to learn that this pathetic light in the old woman's eyes changed my revulsion to a poignant sorrow. I had roughly knocked her from her feet and now hesitated to assist her to rise again! Truly, she was scorned and rejected by all. A wave of tenderness, that cannot be described, that could not be resisted, swept over me. My eyes grew misty and a great remorse claimed me.

"Poor old soul!" I whispered.

Stooping, I gently raised the shrivelled, ape-like head, resting it against my knee; and, bending down, I kissed the old woman on the brow!

I record the fact, but even now, looking back upon its happening, and seeking to recapture the cold, solitary Saville Grainger who has left the world, I realise the wonder of it. That I should have given rein to such an impulse! That such an impulse should have stirred me! Which phenomenon was the more remarkable?

The result of my act—regretted as soon as performed—was singular. The aged, hideous creature sighed in a manner I can never forget, and an expression that almost lent comeliness to her features momentarily crept over her face. Then she rose to her feet with difficulty, raised her hands as if blessing me, and muttering something in Arabic went shuffling along the deserted street, stooping as she walked.

Apparently the episode had passed unnoticed. Certainly if anyone witnessed it he was well concealed. But, conscious of a strange embarrassment, with which were mingled other tumultuous emotions, I turned out of the Street of the Silversmiths and found myself amid the normal activities of the quarter again. The memory of the Kiss was repugnant, I wanted to wipe my lips—but something seemed to forbid the act; a lingering compassion that was almost a yearning.

For once in my life I desired to find myself among normal, healthy, moderately brainless Europeans. I longed for the smell of cigar-smoke, for the rattle of the cocktail-maker and the sight of a pretty face. I hurried to Shepherd's.

II

The same night, after dinner, I walked out of Mena House to look for Hassan Abd-el-Kebir, the dragoman with whom I had contracted for a journey,

by camel, to Sakhara on the following day. He had promised to attend at half-past eight in order to arrange the time of starting in the morning, together with some other details.

I failed to find him, however, among the dragomans and other natives seated outside the hotel, and to kill time I strolled leisurely down the road toward the electric-tram terminus. I had taken no more than ten paces, I suppose, when a tall native, muffled to the tip of his nose in white and wearing a white turban, appeared out of the darkness beside me, thrust a small package into my hand, and, touching his brow, his lips and his breast with both hands, bowed and departed. I saw him no more!

Standing there in the road, I stared at the little package stupidly. It consisted of a piece of fine white silk fastened about some small, hard object. Evidently, I thought, there had been a mistake. The package could not have been intended for me.

Returning to the hotel, I stood near a lamp and unfastened the silk, which was delicately perfumed. It contained a piece of lapis-lazuli carved in the form of a heart, beautifully mounted in gold and bearing three Arabic letters, inlaid in some way, also in gold!

At this singular ornament I stared harder than ever. Certainly the muffled native had made a strange mistake. This was a love-token—and emphatically not for *me*!

I was standing there lost in wonderment, the heart of lapis-lazuli in my palm when the voice of Hassan disturbed my stupor.

"Ah, my gentleman, I am sorry to be late, but—"

The voice ceased. I looked up.

"Well?" I said.

Then I, too, said no more. Hassan Abd-el-Kebir was glaring at the ornament in my hand as though I had held, not a very choice example of native jewellery, but an adder or a scorpion!

"What's the matter?" I asked, recovering from my surprise. "Do you know to whom this amulet belongs?"

He muttered something in guttural Arabic ere replying to my question. Then:

"It is the heart of lapis," he said, in a strange voice. "It is the heart of lapis!"

"So much is evident," I cried, laughing. "But does it alarm you?"

"Please," he said softly, and held out a brown hand—"I will see."

I placed the thing in his open palm and he gazed at it as one might imagine an orchid hunter would gaze at a new species of *Odontoglossum*.

"What do the figures mean?" I asked.

"They form the word *alf*," he replied.

"*Alf*? Somebody's name!" I said, still laughing.

"In Arab it mean ten hundred," he whispered.

"A thousand?"

"Yes—one thousand."

"Well?"

Hassan returned the ornament to me, and his expression was so strange that I began to grow really annoyed. He was looking at me with a mingling of envy and compassion which I found to be quite insufferable.

"Hassan," I said sternly, "you will tell me all you know about this matter. One would imagine that you suspected me of stealing the thing!"

"Ah, no, my gentleman!" he protested earnestly. "But I will tell you, yes, only you will not believe me."

"Never mind. Tell me."

Thereupon Hassan Abd-el-Kebir told me the most improbable story to which I had ever listened. Since to reproduce it in his imperfect English, with my own frequent interjections, would be tedious, I will give it in brief. Some of the historical details, imperfectly related by Hassan as I learned later, I have corrected.

In the reign of the Khalif El-Mamûn—a son of Hârun er-Rashid and brother of the prototype of Beckford's *Vathek*—one Shâwar was Governor of Egypt, and the daughter of the Governor, Scheherazade, was famed throughout the domains of the Khalif as the most beautiful maiden in the land. Wazirs and princes sought her hand in vain. Her heart was given to a handsome young merchant of Cairo, Ahmad er-Madi, who was also the wealthiest man in the city. Shâwar, although an indulgent father, would not hear of such a union, however, but he hesitated to destroy his daughter's happiness by forcing her into an unwelcome marriage. Finally, passion conquered reason in the breasts of the lovers and they fled, Scheherazade escaping from the palace of her father by means of a rope-ladder smuggled into the harem apartments by a slave whom Ahmad's gold had tempted, and meeting Ahmad outside the gardens where he waited with a fleet horse.

Even the guard at the city gate had been bought by the wealthy merchant, and the pair succeeded in escaping from Cairo.

The extensive possessions of Ahmad were confiscated by the enraged father and a sentence of death was passed upon the absent man—to be instantly put into

execution in the event of his arrest anywhere within the domain of the Khalif.

Exiled in a distant oasis, the Sheikh of which was bound to Ahmad by ties of ancient friendship, the prospect which had seemed so alluring to Scheherazade became clouded. Recognising this change in her attitude, Ahmad er-Madi racked his brains for some scheme whereby he might recover his lost wealth and surround his beautiful wife with the luxury to which she had been accustomed. In this extremity he had recourse to a certain recluse who resided in a solitary spot in the desert far from the haunts of men and who was widely credited with magical powers.

It was a whole week's journey to the abode of the wizard, and, unknown to Ahmad, during his absence a son of the Khalif, visiting Egypt, chanced to lose his way on a hunting expedition, and came upon the secret oasis in which Scheherazade was hiding. This prince had been one of her most persistent suitors.

The ancient magician consented to receive Ahmad, and the first boon which the enamoured young man craved of him was that he might grant him a sight of Scheherazade. The student of dark arts consented. Bidding Ahmad to look into a mirror, he burned the secret perfumes and uttered the prescribed incantation. At first mistily, and then quite clearly, Ahmad saw Scheherazade, standing in the moonlight beneath a tall palm tree—her lips raised to those of her former suitor!

At that the world grew black before the eyes of Ahmad. And he, who had come a long and arduous journey at the behest of love, now experienced an equally passionate hatred. Acquainting the magician with what he had seen, he demanded that he should exercise his art in visiting upon the false Scheherazade, the most terrible curse that it lay within his power to invoke!

The learned man refused; whereupon Ahmad, insane with sorrow and anger, drew his sword and gave the magician choice of compliance or instant death. The threat sufficed. The wizard performed a ghastly conjuration, calling down upon Scheherazade the curse of an ugliness beyond that of humanity, and which should remain with her not for the ordinary span of a lifetime but for incalculable years, during which she should continue to live in the flesh, loathed, despised, and shunned of all!

"Until one thousand compassionate men, unasked and of their own free will, shall each have bestowed a kiss upon thee," was the exact text of the curse. "Then thou shalt regain thy beauty, thy love—and death."

Ahmad er-Madi staggered out from the cavern, blinded by a hundred emotions—already sick with remorse; and one night's stage on his return journey

dropped dead from his saddle . . . stricken by the malignant will of the awful being whose power he had invoked! I will conclude this wild romance in the words of Hassan, the dragoman, as nearly as I can recall them.

"And so," he said, his voice lowered in awe, "Scheherazade, who was stricken with age and ugliness in the very hour that the curse was spoken, went out into the world, my gentleman. She begged her way from place to place, and as the years passed by accumulated much wealth in that manner. Finally, it is said, she returned to Cairo, her native city, and there remained. To each man who bestowed a kiss upon her—and such men were rare—she caused a heart of lapis to be sent, and upon the heart was engraved in gold the number of the kiss! It is said that these gifts ensured to those upon whom they were bestowed the certain possession of their beloved! Once before, when I was a small child, I saw such an amulet, and the number upon it was nine hundred and ninety-nine."

The thing was utterly incredible, of course; merely a picturesque example of Eastern imagination; but just to see what effect it would have upon him, I told Hassan about the old woman in the Mûski. I had to do so. Frankly, the coincidence was so extraordinary that it worried me. When I had finished:

"It was she—Scheherazade," he said fearfully. "And it was the *last* kiss!"

"What then?" I asked.

"Nothing, my gentleman. I do not know!"

III

Throughout the expedition to Sakhara on the following day I could not fail to note that Hassan was covertly watching me—and his expression annoyed me intensely. It was that compound of compassion and resignation which one might bestow upon a condemned man.

I charged him with it, but of course he denied any such sentiment. Nevertheless, I knew that he entertained it, and, what was worse, I began, in an uncomfortable degree, to share it with him! I cannot make myself clearer. But I simply felt the normal world to be slipping from under my feet, and, no longer experiencing a desire to clutch at modernity as I had done after my meeting with the old woman, I found myself to be reconciled to my fate!

To my fate? . . . to what fate? I did not know; but I realized, beyond any shade of doubt, that something tremendous, inevitable, and ultimate was about to happen to me. I caught myself unconsciously raising the heart of lapis-lazuli to my lips! Why I did so I had no idea; I seemed to have lost identity. I no longer knew myself.

When Hassan parted from me at Mena House that evening he could not disguise the fact that he regarded the parting as final; yet my plans were made for several weeks ahead. Nor did I quarrel with the man's curious attitude. I regarded the parting as final, also!

In a word I was becoming reconciled—to something. It is difficult, all but impossible, to render such a frame of mind comprehensible, and I shall not even attempt the task, but leave the events of the night to speak for themselves.

After dinner I lighted a cigarette, and avoiding a particularly persistent and very pretty widow who was waiting to waylay me in the lounge, I came out of the hotel and strolled along in the direction of the Pyramid. Once I looked back—bidding a silent farewell to Mena House! Then I took out the heart of lapis-lazuli from my pocket and kissed it rapturously—kissed it as I had never kissed any object or any person in the whole course of my life!

And why I did so I had no idea.

All who read my story will be prepared to learn that in this placid and apparently feeble frame of mind I slipped from life, from the world. It was not so. The modern man, the Saville Grainger once known in Fleet Street, came to life again for one terrible, strenuous moment . . . and then passed out of life for ever.

Just before I reached the Pyramid, and at a lonely spot in the path—for this was not a "Sphinx and Pyramid night"—that is to say, the moon was not at the full—a tall, muffled native appeared at my elbow. He was the same man who had brought me the heart of lapis-lazuli, or his double. I started.

He touched me lightly on the arm.

"Follow," he said—and pointed ahead into the darkness below the plateau.

I moved off obediently. Then—suddenly, swiftly, came revolt. The modern man within me flared into angry life. I stopped dead, and "Who are you? Where are you leading me?" I cried.

I received no reply.

A silk scarf was slipped over my head by someone who, silently, must have been following me, and drawn tight enough to prevent any loud outcry but not so as to endanger my breathing. I fought like a madman. I knew, and the knowledge appalled me, that I was fighting for life. Arms like bands of steel grasped me; I was lifted, bound and carried—I knew not where. . . .

Placed in some kind of softly padded saddle, or, as I have since learned, into a *shibriyeh* or covered litter on a camel's back, I felt the animal rise to its ungainly height and move off swiftly. As suddenly as revolt had flamed up, resignation returned. I was contented. My bonds were unnecessary; my re-

billion was ended. I yearned, wildly, for the end of the desert journey! Someone was calling me and all my soul replied.

For hours, as it seemed, the camel raced ceaselessly on. Absolute silence reigned about me. Then, in the distance I heard voices, and the gait of the camel changed. Finally the animal stood still. Came a word of guttural command, and the camel dropped to its knees. Pillowed among a pile of scented cushions, I experienced no discomfort from this usually painful operation.

I was lifted out of my perfumed couch and set upon my feet. Having been allowed to stand for a while until the effects of remaining so long in a constrained position had worn off, I was led forward into some extensive building. Marble pavements were beneath my feet, fountains played, and the air was heavy with burning ambergris.

I was placed with my back to a pillar and bound there, but not harshly. The bandage about my head was removed. I stared around me.

A magnificent Eastern apartment met my gaze—a great hall open on one side to the desert. Out upon the sands I could see a group of men who had evidently been my captors and my guards. The one who had unfastened the silk scarf I could not see, but I heard him moving away behind the pillar to which I was bound.

Stretched upon a luxurious couch before me was a woman.

If I were to seek to describe her I should inevitably fail, for her loveliness surpassed everything which I had ever beheld—of which I had ever dreamed. I found myself looking into her eyes, and in the depths I found all that I had missed in life, and lost all that I had found.

She smiled, rose, and taking a jewelled dagger from a little table beside her, approached me. My heart beat until I felt almost suffocated as she came near. And when she bent and cut the silken lashing which bound me, I knew such rapture as I had hitherto counted an invention of Arabian poets. I was raised above the joys of common humanity and tasted the joys of the gods. She placed the dagger in my hand.

"My life is thine," she said. "Take it."

And clutching at the silken raiment draping her beautiful bosom, she invited me to plunge the blade into her heart!

The knife dropped, clattering upon the marble pavement. For one instant I hesitated, watching her, devouring her with my eyes; then I swept her to me and pressed upon her sweet lips the thousand and first kiss. . . .

(Note.—The manuscript of Saville Grainger finishes here.)

The Dreams of Albert Moreland

by Fritz Leiber, Jr.

Arthur Machen found among the byways and streets of present-day London a weirdness that brought ancient terror into tune with modern paths. Fritz Leiber, Jr., who is of a more recent generation than Machen, seeks to achieve something of the same result in his native, United States, scene. He says of his writings: "It is the American metropolis, jammed with iron and stone, that sets off my sense of the horrible and beautiful. Things like the buzz of a defective neon sign, the black framework of the elevated, muttering of machinery one cannot identify—there are terrors in the modern city in comparison to which the darks of Gothic castles and haunted woods are light."



I

THINK OF the autumn of 1939, not as the beginning of the Second World War, but as the period in which Albert Moreland dreamed the dream. The two events—the war and the dream—are not, however, divorced in my mind. Indeed, I sometimes fear that there is a connection between them, but it is a connection which no sane person will consider seriously, if he is wise.

Albert Moreland was, and perhaps still is, a professional chess-player. That fact has an important bearing on the dream, or dreams. He made most of his scant income at a games arcade in Lower Manhattan, taking on all comers—the enthusiast who gets a kick out of trying to beat an expert, the lonely man who turns to chess as to a drug, or the down-and-outer tempted into purchasing a half hour of intellectual dignity for a quarter.

After I got to know Moreland, I often wandered into the arcade and watched him playing as many as three or four games simultaneously, oblivious to the clicking and whirring of the pinball games and the intermittent reports from the shooting gallery. He got fifteen cents for every win; the house took the extra dime. When he lost, neither got anything.

Eventually I found out that he was a much better player than he needed to be for his arcade job. He had won casual games from internationally famous

masters. A couple of Manhattan clubs had wanted to groom him for the big tournaments, but lack of ambition kept him drifting along in obscurity. I got the impression that he thought chess too trivial a business to warrant serious consideration, although he was perfectly willing to dribble his life away at the arcade, waiting for something really important to come along, if it ever did. Once in a while he eked out his income by playing on a club team, getting as much as five dollars.

I met him at the old brownstone house where we both had rooms on the same floor, and it was there that he first told me about the dream.

We had just finished a game of chess, and I was idly watching the battle-scarred pieces slide off the board and pile up in a fold of the blanket on his cot. Outside a fretful wind eddied the dry grit. There was a surge of traffic noises, and the buzz of a defective neon sign. I had just lost, but I was glad that Moreland never let me win, as he occasionally did with the players at the arcade, to encourage them. Indeed, I thought myself fortunate in being able to play with Moreland at all, not knowing then that I was probably the best friend he had.

I was saying something obvious about chess.

"You think it a complicated game?" he inquired, peering at me with quizzical intentness, his dark eyes like round windows pushed up under heavy eaves. "Well, perhaps it is. But I play a game a thousand times more complex every night in my dreams. And the queer thing is that the game goes on night after night. The same game. I never really sleep. Only dream about the game."

Then he told me, speaking with a mixture of facetious jest and uncomfortable seriousness that was to characterize many of our conversations.

The images of his dream, as he described them, were impressively simple, without any of the usual merging and incongruity. A board so vast he sometimes had to walk out on it to move his pieces. A great many more squares than in chess and arranged in patches of different colors, the power of the pieces varying according to the color of the square on which they stood. Above and to each side of the board only blackness, but a blackness that suggested starless infinity, as if, as he put it, the scene were laid on the very top of the universe.

When he was awake he could not quite remember all the rules of the game, although he recalled a great many isolated points, including the interesting fact that—quite unlike chess—his pieces and those of his adversary did not duplicate each other. Yet he was convinced that he not only understood the game

perfectly while dreaming, but also was able to play it in the highly strategic manner of the master chess player. It was, he said, as though his night mind had many more dimensions of thought than his waking mind, and were able to grasp intuitively complex series of moves that would ordinarily have to be reasoned out step by step.

"A feeling of increased mental power is a very ordinary dream-delusion, isn't it?" he added, peering at me sharply. "And so I suppose you might say it's a very ordinary dream."

I did not know quite how to take that last remark, so I prodded him with a question.

"What do the pieces look like?"

It turned out that they were similar to those of chess in that they were considerably stylized and yet suggested the original forms—architectural, animal, ornamental—which had served as their inspiration. But there the similarity ended. The inspiring forms, so far as he could guess at them, were grotesque in the extreme. There were terraced towers subtly distorted out of the perpendicular, strangely asymmetric polygons that made him think of temples and tombs, vegetable-animal shapes which defied classification and whose formalized limbs and external organs suggested a variety of unknown functions. The more powerful pieces seemed to be modeled after life forms, for they carried stylized weapons and other implements, and wore things similar to crowns and tiaras—a little like the king, queen and bishop in chess—while the carving indicated voluminous robes and hoods. But they were in no other sense anthropomorphic. Moreland sought in vain for earthly analogies, mentioning Hindu idols, prehistoric reptiles, futurist sculpture, squids bearing daggers in their tentacles, and huge ants and mantes and other insects with fantastically adapted end-organs.

"I think you would have to search the whole universe—every planet and every dead sun—before you could find the original models," he said, frowning. "Remember, there is nothing cloudy or vague about the pieces themselves in my dream. They are as tangible as this rook." He picked up the piece, clenched his fist around it for a moment, and then held it out toward me on his open palm. "It is only in what they suggest that the vagueness lies."

It was strange, but his words seemed to open some dream-eye in my own mind, so that I could almost see the things he described. I asked him if he experienced fear during his dream.

He replied that the pieces one and all filled him with repugnance—those based on higher life forms usually to a greater degree than the architectural

ones. He hated to have to touch or handle them. There was one piece in particular which had an intensely morbid fascination for his dream-self. He identified it as "the archer" because the stylized weapon it bore gave the impression of being able to hurt at a distance; but like the rest it was quite inhuman. He described it as representing a kind of intermediate, warped life form which had achieved more than human intellectual power without losing—but rather gaining—in brute cruelty and malignity. It was one of the opposing pieces for which there was no duplicate among his own. The mingled fear and loathing it inspired in him sometimes became so great that they interfered with his strategic grasp of the whole dream-game, and he was afraid his feeling toward it would sometime rise to such a pitch that he would be forced to capture it just to get it off the board, even though such a capture might compromise his whole position.

"God knows how my mind ever cooked up such a hideous entity," he finished, with a quick grin. "Five hundred years ago I'd have said the Devil put it there."

"Speaking of the Devil," I asked, immediately feeling my flippancy was silly, "whom do you play against in your dream?"

Again he frowned. "I don't know. The opposing pieces move by themselves. I will have made a move, and then, after waiting for what seems like an eon, all on edge as in chess, one of the opposing pieces will begin to shake a little and then to wobble back and forth. Gradually the movement increases in extent until the piece gets off balance and begins to rock and careen across the board, like a water tumbler on a pitching ship, until it reaches the proper square. Then, slowly, as it began, the movement subsides. I don't know, but it always makes me think of some huge, invisible, senile creature—crafty, selfish, cruel. You've watched that trembly old man at the arcade? The one who always drags the pieces across the board without lifting them, his hand constantly shaking? It's a little like that."

I nodded. His description made it very vivid. For the first time I began to think of how unpleasant such a dream might be.

"And it goes on night after night?" I asked.

"Night after night!" he affirmed with sudden fierceness. "And always the same game. It has been more than a month now, and my forces are just beginning to grapple with the enemy. It's draining off my mental energy. I wish it would stop. I'm getting so that I hate to go to sleep." He paused and turned away. "It seems queer," he said after a moment in a softer voice, smiling apologetically, "It seems queer to get so worked up over a dream. But if you've

had bad ones, you know how they can cloud your thoughts all day. And I haven't really managed to get over to you the sort of feeling that grips me while I'm dreaming, and while my brain is working at the game and plotting move-sequence after move-sequence and weighing a thousand complex possibilities. There's repugnance, yes, and fear. I've told you that. But the dominant feeling is one of responsibility. I must not lose the game. More than my own personal welfare depends upon it. There are some terrible stakes involved, though I am never quite sure what they are.

"When you were a little child, did you ever worry tremendously about something, with that complete lack of proportion characteristic of childhood? Did you ever feel that everything, literally everything, depended upon your performing some trivial action, some unimportant duty, in just the right way? Well, while I dream, I have the feeling that I'm playing for some stake as big as the fate of mankind. One wrong move may plunge the universe into unending night. Sometimes, in my dream, I feel sure of it."

His voice trailed off and he stared at the chessmen. I made some remarks and started to tell about an air-raid nightmare I had just had, but it didn't seem very important. And I gave him some vague advice about changing his sleeping habits, which did not seem very important either, although he accepted it with good grace. As I started back to my room he said, "Amusing to think, isn't it, that I'll be playing the game again as soon as my head hits the pillow?" He grinned and added lightly, "Perhaps it will be over sooner than I expect. Lately I've had the feeling that my adversary is about to unleash a surprise attack, although he pretends to be on the defensive." He grinned again and shut the door.

As I waited for sleep, staring at the wavy churning darkness that is more in the eyes than outside them, I began to wonder whether Moreland did not stand in greater need of psychiatric treatment than most chess-players. Certainly a person without family, friends, or proper occupation is liable to mental aberrations. Yet he seemed sane enough. Perhaps the dream was a compensation for his failure to use anything like the full potentialities of his highly talented mind, even at chessplaying. Certainly it was a satisfyingly grandiose vision, with its unearthly background and its implications of stupendous mental skill.

There floated into my mind the lines from the *Rubaiyat* about the cosmic chess-player who, "Hither and thither moves and checks, and slays, And one by one back in the Closet lays."

Then I thought of the emotional atmosphere of his dreams, and the feelings

of terror and boundless responsibility, of tremendous duties and cataclysmic consequences—feelings I recognized from my own dreams—and I compared them with the mad, dismal state of the world (for it was October, and sense of utter catastrophe had not yet been dulled) and I thought of the million drifting Morelands suddenly shocked into a realization of the desperate plight of things and of priceless chances lost forever in the past and of their own ill-defined but certain complicity in the disaster. I began to see Moreland's dream as the symbol of a last-ditch, too-late struggle against the implacable forces of fate and chance. And my night thoughts began to revolve around the fancy that some cosmic beings, neither gods nor men, had created human life long ago as a jest or experiment or artistic form, and had now decided to base the fate of their creation on the result of a game of skill played against one of their creatures.

Suddenly I realized that I was wide awake and that the darkness was no longer restful. I snapped on the light and impulsively decided to see if Moreland was still up.

The hall was as shadowy and funereal as that of most boarding houses late at night, and I tried to minimize the inevitable dry creakings. I waited for a few moments in front of Moreland's door, but heard nothing, so instead of knocking, I presumed upon our familiarity and edged open the door, quietly, in order not to disturb him if he were abed.

It was then that I heard his voice, and so certain was my impression that the sound came from a considerable distance that I immediately walked back to the stair-well and called, "Moreland, are you down there?"

Only then did I realize what he had said. Perhaps it was the peculiarity of the words that caused them first to register on my mind as merely a series of sounds.

The words were, "My spider-thing seizes your armor-bearer. I threaten."

It instantly occurred to me that the words were similar in general form to any one of a number of conventional expressions in chess, such as, "My rook captures your bishop. I give check." But there are no such pieces as "spider-things" or "armor-bearers" in chess or any other game I know of.

I automatically walked back towards his room, though I still doubted he was there. The voice had sounded much too far away—outside the building or at least in a remote section of it.

But he was lying on the cot, his upturned face revealed by the light of a distant electric advertisement, which blinked on and off at regular intervals. The traffic sounds, which had been almost inaudible in the hall, made the

half-darkness restless and irritably alive. The defective neon sign still buzzed and droned insectlike as it had earlier in the evening.

I tiptoed over and looked down at him. His face, more pale than it should have been because of some quality of the intermittent light, was set in an expression of painfully intense concentration—forehead vertically furrowed, muscles around the eye contracted, lips pursed to a line. I wondered if I ought to awaken him. I was acutely aware of the impersonally murmuring city all around us—block on block of shuttling, routined, aloof existence—and the contrast made his sleeping face seem all the more sensitive and vividly individual and unguarded, like some soft though purposefully tense organism which has lost its protective shell.

As I waited uncertainly, the tight lips opened a little without losing any of their tautness. He spoke, and for a second time the impression of distance was so compelling that I involuntarily looked over my shoulder and out the dustily glowing window. Then I began to tremble.

"My coiled-thing writhes to the thirteenth square of the green ruler's domain," was what he said, but I can only suggest the quality of the voice. Some inconceivable sort of distance had drained it of all richness and throatiness and overtones so that it was hollow and flat and faint and disturbingly mournful, as voices sometimes sound in open country, or from up on a high roof, or when there is a bad telephone connection. I felt I was the victim of some gruesome deception, and yet I knew that ventriloquism is a matter of motionless lips and clever suggestion rather than any really convincing change in the quality of the voice itself. Without volition there rose in my mind visions of infinite space, unending darkness. I felt as if I were being wrenched up and away from the world, so that Manhattan lay below me like a black asymmetric spearhead outlined by leaden waters, and then still farther outward at increasing speed until earth and sun and stars and galaxies were all lost and I was beyond the universe. To such a degree did the quality of Moreland's voice affect me.

I do not know how long I stood there waiting for him to speak again, with the noises of Manhattan flowing around yet not quite touching me, and the electric sign blinking on and off unalterably like the ticking of a clock. I could only think about the game that was being played, and wonder whether Moreland's adversary had yet made an answering move, and whether things were going for or against Moreland. There was no telling from his face; its intensity of concentration did not change. During those moments or minutes I stood there, I believed implicitly in the reality of the game. As if I myself were

somehow dreaming, I could not question the rationality of my belief or break the spell which bound me.

When finally his lips parted a little and I experienced again that impression of impossible, eerie ventriloquism—the words this time being, “My horned-creature vaults over the twisted tower, challenging the archer”—my fear broke loose from whatever controlled it and I stumbled toward the door.

Then came what was, in an oblique way, the strangest part of the whole episode. In the time it took me to walk the length of the corridor back to my room, most of my fear and most of the feeling of complete alienage and other-worldliness which had dominated me while I was watching Moreland’s face, receded so swiftly that I even forgot, for the time being, how great they had been. I do not know why that happened. Perhaps it was because the unwholesome realm of Moreland’s dream was so grotesquely dissimilar to anything in the real world. Whatever the cause, by the time I opened the door to my room I was thinking, “Such nightmares can’t be wholesome. Perhaps he should see a psychiatrist. Yet it’s only a dream,” and so on. I felt tired and stupid. Very soon I was asleep.

But some wraith of the original emotions must have lingered, for I awoke next morning with the fear that something had happened to Moreland. Dressing hurriedly, I knocked at his door, but found the room empty, the bedclothes still rumpled. I inquired of the landlady, and she said he had gone out at eight-fifteen as usual. The bald statement did not quite satisfy my vague anxiety. But since my job-hunting that day happened to lie in the direction of the arcade, I had an excuse to wander in. Moreland was stolidly pushing pieces around with an abstracted, tousle-haired fellow of Slavic features, and casually conducting two rapid-fire checker games on the side. Reassured, I went on without bothering him.

That evening we had a long talk about dreams in general, and I found him surprisingly well-read on the subject and scientifically cautious in his attitudes. Rather to my chagrin, it was I who introduced such dubious topics as clairvoyance, mental telepathy, and the possibility of strange telescopings and other distortions of time and space during dream states. Some foolish reticence about admitting I had pushed my way into his room last night kept me from telling him what I had heard and seen, but he freely told me he had had another installment of the usual dream. He seemed to take a more philosophical attitude now that he had shared his experiences with someone. Together we speculated as to the possible daytime sources of his dream. It was after twelve when we said goodnight.

I went away with the feeling of having been let down—vaguely unsatisfied. I think the fear I had experienced the previous night and then almost forgotten must have been gnawing at me obscurely.

And the following evening it found an avenue of return. Thinking Moreland must be tired of talking about dreams, I coaxed him into a game of chess. But in the middle of the game he put back a piece he was about to move, and said, "You know, that damned dream of mine is getting very bothersome."

It turned out that his dream adversary had finally loosed the long-threatened attack, and that the dream itself had turned into a kind of nightmare. "It's very much like what happens to you in a game of chess," he explained. "You go along confident that you have a strong position and that the game is taking the right direction. Every move your opponent makes is one you have foreseen. You get to feeling almost omniscient. Suddenly he makes a totally unexpected attacking move. For a moment you think it must be a stupid blunder on his part. Then you look a little more closely and realize that you have totally overlooked something and that his attack is a sound one. Then you begin to sweat."

"Of course, I've always experienced fear and anxiety and a sense of overpowering responsibility during the dream. But my pieces were like a wall, protecting me. Now I can see only the cracks in that wall. At any one of a hundred weak points it might conceivably be broken. Whenever one of the opposing pieces begins to wobble and shake, I wonder whether, when its move is completed, there will flash into my mind the unalterable and unavoidable combination of moves leading to my defeat. Last night I thought I saw such a move, and the terror was so great that everything swirled and I seemed to drop through millions of miles of emptiness in an instant. Yet just in that instant of waking I realized I had miscalculated, and that my position, though perilous, was still secure. It was so vivid that I almost carried with me into my waking thoughts the reason why, but then some of the steps in the train of dream-reasoning dropped out, as if my waking mind were not big enough to hold them all."

He also told me that his fixation on "the archer" was becoming increasingly troublesome. It filled him with a special kind of terror, different in quality, but perhaps higher in pitch than that engendered in him by the dream as a whole: a crazy morbid terror, characterized by intense repugnance, nerve-twisting exasperation, and reckless suicidal impulses.

"I can't get rid of the feeling," he said, "that the beastly thing will in some unfair and underhanded manner be the means of my defeat."

He looked very tired to me, although his face was of the compact, tough-skinned sort that does not readily show fatigue, and I felt concern for his physical and nervous welfare. I suggested that he consult a doctor (I did not like to say psychiatrist) and pointed out that sleeping tablets might be of some help.

"But in a deeper sleep the dream might be even more vivid and real," he answered, grimacing sardonically. "No, I'd rather play out the game under the present conditions."

I was glad to find that he still viewed the dream as an interesting and temporary psychological phenomenon (what else he could have viewed it as, I did not stop to analyze). Even while admitting to me the exceptional intensity of his emotions, he maintained something of a jesting air. Once he compared his dream to a paranoid's delusions of persecution, and asked whether I didn't think it was good enough to get him admitted to an asylum.

"Then I could forget the arcade and devote all my time to dream-chess," he said, laughing sharply as soon as he saw I was beginning to wonder whether he had not meant the remark half-seriously.

But some part of my mind was not convinced by his protestations, and when later I tossed in the dark, my imagination perversely kept picturing the universe as a great arena in which each creature is doomed to engage in a losing game of skill against demoniac mentalities which, however long they may play cat and mouse, are always assured of final mastery—or almost assured, so that it would be a miracle if they were beaten. I found myself comparing them to certain chess-players, who if they cannot beat an opponent by superior skill, will capitalize on unpleasant personal mannerisms in order to exasperate him and break down the lucidity of his thinking.

This mood colored my own nebulous dreams and persisted into the next day. As I walked the streets I felt myself inundated by an omnipresent anxiety, and I sensed taut, nervous misery in each passing face. For once I seemed able to look behind the mask which every person wears and which is so characteristically pronounced in a congested city, and see what lay behind—the egotistical sensitivity, the smouldering irritation, the thwarted longing, the defeat . . . and, above all, the anxiety, too ill-defined and lacking in definite object to be called fear, but nonetheless infecting every thought and action, and making trivial things terrible. And it seemed to me that social, economic, and physiological factors, even Death and the War, were insufficient to explain such anxiety, and that it was in reality an upwelling from something dubious and horrible in the very constitution of the universe.

That evening I found myself at the arcade. Here too I sensed a difference in things, for Moreland's abstraction was not the calculating boredom with which I was familiar, and his tiredness was shockingly apparent. One of his three opponents, after shifting around restlessly, called his attention to a move, and Moreland jerked his head as if he had been dozing. He immediately made an answering move, and quickly lost his queen and the game by a trap that was very obvious even to me. A little later he lost another game by an equally elementary oversight. The boss of the arcade, a big beefy man, ambled over and stood behind Moreland, his heavy-jowled face impassive, seeming to study the position of the pieces in the last game. Moreland lost that too.

"Who won?" asked the boss.

Moreland indicated his opponent. The boss grunted noncommittally and walked off.

No one else sat down to play. It was near closing time. I was not sure whether Moreland had noticed me, but after a while he stood up and nodded at me, and got his hat and coat. We walked the long stretch back to the rooming house. He hardly spoke a word, and my sensation of morbid insight into the world around persisted and kept me silent. He walked as usual with long, slightly stiff-kneed strides, hands in his pockets, hat pulled low, frowning at the pavement a dozen feet ahead.

When we reached the room he sat down without taking off his coat and said, "Of course, it was the dream made me lose those games. When I woke this morning it was terribly vivid, and I almost remembered the exact position and all the rules. I started to make a diagram. . . ."

He indicated a piece of wrapping paper on the table. Hasty criss-crossed lines, incomplete, represented what seemed to be the corner of an indefinitely larger pattern. There were about five hundred squares. On various squares were marks and names standing for pieces, and there were arrows radiating out from the pieces to show their power of movement.

"I got that far. Then I began to forget," he said tiredly, staring at the floor. "But I'm still very close to it. Like a mathematical puzzle you've not quite solved. Parts of the board kept flashing into my mind all day, so that I felt with a little more effort I would be able to grasp the whole. Yet I can't."

His voice changed. "I'm going to lose, you know. It's that piece I call 'the archer.' Last night I couldn't concentrate on the board; it kept drawing my eyes. The worst thing is that it's the spearhead of my adversary's attack. I ache to capture it. But I must not, for it's a kind of catspaw too, the bait of the strategic trap my adversary is laying. If I capture it, I will expose myself to

defeat. So I must watch it coming closer and closer—it has an ugly, double-angled sort of hopping move—knowing that my only chance is to sit tight until my adversary overreaches himself and I can counterattack. But I won't be able to. Soon, perhaps tonight, my nerve will crack and I will capture it."

I was studying the diagram with great interest, and only half heard the rest—a description of the actual appearance of "the archer." I heard him say something about "a five-lobed head . . . the head almost hidden by a hood . . . appendages, each with four joints, appearing from under the robe . . . an eight-pronged weapon with wheels and levers about it, and little bag-shaped receptacles, as though for poison . . . posture suggesting it is lifting the weapon to aim it . . . all intricately carved in some lustrous red stone, speckled with violet . . . an expression of bestial, supernatural malevolence. . . ."

Just then all my attention focussed suddenly on the diagram, and I felt a tightening shiver of excitement, for I recognized two familiar names, which I had never heard Moreland mention while awake. "Spider-thing" and "green ruler."

Without pausing to think, I told him of how I had listened to his sleep-talking three nights before, and about the peculiar phrases he had spoken which tallied so well with the entries on the diagram. I poured out my account with melodramatic haste. My discovery of the entries on the diagram, nothing exceptionally amazing in itself, probably made such a great impression on me because I had hitherto strangely forgotten or repressed the intense fear I had experienced when I had watched Moreland sleeping.

Before I was finished, however, I noticed the growing anxiety of his expression, and abruptly realized that what I was saying might not have the best effect on him. So I minimized my recollection of the unwholesome quality of his voice—the overpowering impression of distance—and the fear it engendered in me.

Even so, it was obvious that he had received a severe shock. For a little while he seemed to be on the verge of some serious nervous derangement, walking up and down with fierce, jerky movements, throwing out crazy statements, coming back again and again to the diabolical convincingness of the dream—which my revelation seemed to have intensified for him—and finally breaking down into vague appeals for help.

Those appeals had an immediate effect on me, making me forget any wild thoughts of my own and putting everything on a personal level. All my instincts were now to aid Moreland, and I once again saw the whole matter as something for a psychiatrist to handle. Our roles had changed. I was no longer

the half-awed listener, but the steadying friend to whom he turned for advice. That, more than anything, gave me a feeling of confidence and made my previous speculations seem childish and unhealthy. I felt contemptuous of myself for having encouraged his delusive trains of imagination, and I did as much as I could to make up for it.

After a while my repeated reassurances seemed to take effect. He grew calm and our talk became reasonable once more, though every now and then he would appeal to me about some particular point that worried him. I discovered for the first time the extent to which he had taken the dream seriously. During his lonely broodings, he told me, he had sometimes become convinced that his mind left his body while he slept and traveled immeasurable distances to some transcosmic realm where the game was played. He had the illusion, he said, of getting perilously close to the innermost secrets of the universe and finding they were rotten and evil and sardonic. At times he had been terribly afraid that the pathway between his mind and the realm of the game would "open up" to such a degree that he would be "sucked up bodily from the world," as he put it. His belief that loss of the game would doom the world itself had been much stronger than he had ever admitted to me previously. He had traced a frightening relationship between the progress of the game and of the War, and had begun to believe that the ultimate issue of the War—though not necessarily the victory of either side—hung on the outcome of the game.

At times it had got so bad, he revealed, that his only relief had been in the thought that, no matter what happened, he could never convince others of the reality of his dream. They would always be able to view it as a manifestation of insanity or overwrought imagination. No matter how vivid it became to him he would never have concrete, objective proof.

"It's this way," he said. "You saw me sleeping, didn't you? Right here on this cot. You heard me talk in my sleep, didn't you? About the game. Well, that absolutely proves to you that it's all just a dream, doesn't it? You couldn't rightly believe anything else, could you?"

I do not know why those last ambiguous questions of his should have had such a reassuring effect on me of all people, who had only three nights ago trembled at the indescribable quality of his voice as he talked from his dream. But they did. They seemed like the final seal on an agreement between us to the effect that the dream was only a dream and meant nothing. I began to feel rather buoyant and self-satisfied, like a doctor who has just pulled his patient through a dangerous crisis. I talked to Moreland in what I now realize was almost a pompously sympathetic way, without noticing how dispirited

were his obedient nods of agreement. He said little after those last questions.

I even persuaded him to go out to a nearby lunchroom for a midnight snack, as if—God help me!—I were celebrating my victory over the dream. As we sat at the not-too-dirty counter, smoking our cigarettes and sipping burningly hot coffee, I noticed that he had begun to smile again, which added to my satisfaction. I was blind to the ultimate dejection and submissive hopelessness that lay behind those smiles. As I left him at the door of his room, he suddenly caught hold of my hand and said, "I want to tell you how grateful I am for the way you've worked to pull me out of this mess." I made a deprecating gesture. "No, wait," he continued, "It does mean a lot. Well, anyway, thanks."

I went away with a contented, almost virtuous feeling. I had no apprehensions whatever. I only mused, in a heavily philosophic way, over the strange forms fear and anxiety can assume in our pitifully tangled civilization.

As soon as I was dressed next morning, I rapped briskly at his door and impulsively pushed in without waiting for an answer. For once sunlight was pouring through the dusty window.

Then I saw it, and everything else receded.

It was lying on the crumpled bedclothes, half hidden by a fold of blanket, a thing perhaps ten inches high, as solid as any statuette, and as undeniably real. But from the first glance I knew that its form bore no relation to any earthly creature. This fact would have been as apparent to someone who knew nothing of art as to an expert. I also knew that the red, violet-flecked substance from which it had been carved or cast had no classification among the earthly gems and minerals. Every detail was there. The five-lobed head, almost hidden by a hood. The appendages, each with four joints, appearing from under the robe. The eight-pronged weapon with wheels and levers about it, and the little bag-shaped receptacles, as though for poison. Posture suggesting it was lifting the weapon to aim it. An expression of bestial, supernatural malevolence.

Beyond doubting, it was the thing of which Moreland had dreamed. The thing which had horrified and fascinated him, as it now did me, which had rasped unendurably on his nerves, as it now began to rasp on mine. The thing which has been the spearhead and catspaw of his adversary's attack, and whose capture—and it now seemed evident that it had been captured—meant the probable loss of the game. The thing which had somehow been sucked back along an ever-opening path across unimaginable distances from a realm of madness ruling the universe.

Beyond doubting, it was "the archer."

Hardly knowing what moved me, save fear, or what my purpose was, I fled from the room. Then I realized that I must find Moreland. No one had seen him leaving the house. I searched for him all day. The arcade. Chess clubs. Libraries.

It was evening when I went back and forced myself to enter his room. The figure was no longer there. No one at the house professed to know anything about it when I questioned them, but some of the denials were too angry, and I know that "the archer," being obviously a thing of value and having no overly great terrors for those who do not know its history, has most probably found its way into the hands of some wealthy and eccentric collector. Other things have vanished by a similar route in the past.

Or it may be that Moreland returned secretly and took it away with him. But I am certain that it was not made on earth.

And although there are reasons to fear the contrary, I feel that somewhere—in some cheap boarding house or lodging place, or in some madhouse—Albert Moreland, if the game is not already lost and the forfeiture begun, is still playing that unbelievable game for stakes it is unwholesome to contemplate.

The Slugly Beast

by Lord Dunsany

You will be able to find Lord Dunsany's Our Distant Cousins represented in half a dozen popular anthologies. In fact it is quite difficult to fail to encounter that story of a flight to Mars by an aviator friend of the famed raconteur, Jorkens, and of the curious condition this aviator, Ternier, found on the red planet: how humanity was but the penned-up cattle for a fearsome, inhuman master species. What is not common knowledge is that Lord Dunsany wrote a sequel to Our Distant Cousins in response to public demand for further news of the situation on Mars. Even if by some inexplicable chance, you didn't

read the original story, we are sure that you will still find The Slugly Beast an interesting departure from the interplanetary track.



O

F ALL THE remarkable things that I have ever heard Jorkens say, it is odd that the most remarkable should have been not of times long since, but of only last year, and that I should have been able to check it and, to some extent, to be even a witness of the strange adventure that followed.

Some of us at the Club were talking of wireless, when somebody said that on his wireless set he had once got a bit of a programme from Auckland in New Zealand. I forget what our comments were, but I shall never forget the quiet remark of Jorkens, when the rest of us had all finished. "They go further than that," he said.

A few disagreed with Jorkens, and the talk drifted away, but I sat silent, overwhelmed by the wonder of what Jorkens had said. And after a while, when the others were talking among themselves, I said to Jorkens, "Further?" And he nodded his head. No more than that did I say, but when Jorkens rose to go I went away with him, and outside in the street I said: "What was that message?"

"It's only a few words," said Jorkens. "It's all they can get."

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Turner's got it," said Jorkens.

"From?" I said.

"Mars," said he.

I called a taxi and Jorkens got in. "The old address?" I said, and he nodded, and soon we were going towards that rather dingy room beyond Charing Cross Road, in which Turner had told me once of his journey to Mars, and of the lovely girl he met there, a tale which, owing to his own fault in bringing back no convincing proofs, the public had so thoroughly disbelieved. Whether publication of his story in the *Saturday Evening Post* has caused them to alter their verdict I cannot know for certain, though some letters I have received partly lead me to hope so. Let it suffice that this disbelief had so much embittered Turner that he is little likely to have been affected by any reparation

that may have come later. On the way from the club to Turner's rooms Jorkens told me that, as is often the case with men who are deeply interested in anything, he refused to see any impossibility, any improbability even, in the thing that he longed for happening. What Turner had longed for, for the last seven years, was a message from the girl he had left in Mars. That the people in Mars were more refined, more highly civilized than ours, he had seen at a glance; deducing from that that anything we understood, they knew far more of, he argued, as love will, that some communication with his lost lady was possible. He seemed to have overlooked the point that a race greatly superior to man in power, though fouler than any beast on our planet, which held man under lock and key in Mars, as Turner had seen, was not likely to allow him to send out any messages for help to Earth, where man, as this beast probably knew, was free. And yet Turner hoped, and had done little else for the last seven years. "And the message?" I said. But we were at Turner's door now.

And there was Turner, much the same as ever; older, but still smoking cigarettes, and with his thoughts still far from our planet. He remembered me, and I got his attention at once, by reminding him how he had shot the loathsome beast in Mars, that had just wrung the necks of a boy and a girl that it kept in a sort of chicken-run, and by letting him see that I wholly believed his story. Then he talked. He talked almost as though he were continuing the story that he had told me two or three years ago, almost as though we had never gone out of the room. He had been watching wireless for years. He had several sets: he seemed to have bought a new one whenever he could afford it. But the strange thing about him and his wireless was, that while we listen to music or the accounts of baseball matches, or whatever we do listen to, and sometimes impatiently curse atmospheric, or whatever those noisy interruptions are, he listened only to atmospheric. Those shrill hoots that we sometimes hear, or those deep buzzing noises that utterly ruin a song, to him were the only things of any interest whatever. And gradually from amongst them he picked out some, that at first had clearly no connection with any known broadcasting station, or any meaning whatever, and then began to have resemblances to a certain type that he came to know, and from that became definite messages, which he at last decoded.

"But in what language?" I said.

"In English," he answered. "Yes, they must have been getting our broadcasts for years, especially I think Daventry, and I take it they worked out our language. Probably it seemed quite simple to them, though I don't know how

they did it. I have pages covered with scraps of messages that I employed to decode the kind of noisy Morse that they use. Whom they were to, or what they were about, I don't know; but, do you know, the very first message that I was able to make out was a message to me."

"To you!" I exclaimed.

"To myself," he repeated. "It was simply addressed to The Airman from Earth. There are people who won't believe that I ever went there; but certainly nobody else did. It could have been meant for nobody else. There it is."

"A loving message from Mars," I blurted out in my astonishment.

"Not very," he said.

And then I read it. And these are the words exactly. "The slugly beast is waiting for you."

That it wasn't quite English did not surprise me; what surprised me was that six words out of the seven were perfect English, and whenever I think it over another thing surprises me more, and that is the vividly horrible picture that the one word that wasn't English at all conjured up in my mind. And the more I reflected on the unreasonableness of this, the more loathsomely crawled in my imagination the vile form of the slugly beast.

I read it over two or three times.

Then I said to Turner: "Something foul, isn't it?"

Turner nodded his head.

"A friend of the thing you shot?" I asked.

"Must be," said Turner; "or why trouble to send me this?"

Horrible pictures crossed my mind as I thought on a situation that I had never dreamed of before.

"What will you do?" I asked.

And a light shone in his eyes, and brightened all his face. "I am going back," he said.

This was only last year and Mars was again at his nearest, after those journeys of him and us through Space, that had kept us apart for nearly seven years.

"When?" I asked.

"It's a dead secret," he said. "If they knew where I was going they would think me mad, and not let me go up. They believe nothing."

"I won't tell a soul," I said.

I saw that Jorkens knew. Turner looked at him as though to ask if he thought that I could be trusted. Jorkens nodded.

"Tomorrow night," said Turner.

"Tomorrow night!" I exclaimed, the nearness of it making me wonder more at the whole adventure than I had done already.

"Yes," said Turner.

It's a curious thing, but I don't believe that even love would have made Turner take that journey. Jorkens never thought so either. That he was in love with the girl that he left in Mars there is no doubt whatever, though she may have been killed and eaten long ago; but I don't believe that he would ever have gone there again if it had not been for the message, fury alone leading him to that stupendous adventure to which nothing else would have lured him.

"What weapons will you take?" I asked him.

"Revolvers," he said, "and a very light machine-gun; and soft-nosed bullets for all of them."

Something in the gusto with which he spoke of soft-nosed bullets made me quite sure he would go.

"He has a good deal to arrange," said Jorkens. For he had seen, though I never noticed it, that Turner wished to be alone. And then we left, but not until I had got Turner's permission to come down to Ketling aerodrome and see him off on his journey on the following night. The street looked all new and strange to me when we got outside, so absorbed was I with the vastness of Turner's adventure, and so unable to notice most of the things that made up the street I knew; or was it that my imagination, over-stimulated by the mere fact of meeting Turner, saw scores of things in that street that my duller wits had never seen before? I don't know which it was, but the street looked brighter and wider, and full of odd details. Turner had got the message some weeks ago, Jorkens told me as we walked away, and had been working on his aeroplane ever since, and filling in forms about his weapons and ammunition.

"That didn't take him long; did it?" I asked.

"Well, you see," said Jorkens, "they asked him what he wanted all that ammunition for, and he said for rhinoceros, thinking that that would just satisfy them. Unfortunately the man he was talking to knew something of Africa, and he said, 'You don't want soft-nosed bullets for rhinos.' And Turner had to start all over again. And he hadn't much time; he had to attend to his aeroplane."

"What's he doing on that?" I asked.

"He has the old rocket-attachment," he said, "to increase his speed enough to get clear of the pull of Earth. Once outside that his motive power will be

what it was before, the pace with which we are all moving, the pace of Earth round the sun. That will take him to Mars."

"Yes, he told me," I said.

"But what is quite new," said Jorkens, "is his protection against space. Nothing he used last time seemed adequate to him. So this time he is to be entirely shut in by a tiny cabin; he will have his supply of compressed air there, and the walls of it are capable of resisting the emptiness of space. He will be much more comfortable that way."

"And when," I asked with an uneasy feeling, "when is he coming back?"

"That," said Jorkens, "is the difficulty."

"Will he manage it?" I said. "It was a near thing last time."

"He wants to get this beast first," said Jorkens, "and as many of them as possible. It is disgusting that it should be alive at all, eating man." And Jorkens spat. I have seldom seen him so moved. "But the trouble is," he continued, "that he can't stay there more than five weeks, or he'll never get home at all."

"Mars will be getting away from us," I said.

"And it isn't only that," said Jorkens. "You see he's got an idea that at his age and with his physique the time he can live in rarefied air is limited. Yes, it's rarefied there, a rather smaller planet; less air on it. And he's been to a heart specialist, and talked to him all about it. It must have been a curious conversation, for though he told him all about the air there, and just how it affected his breathing, he never told him he'd been to Mars."

"Never told him?" I said.

"No," said Jorkens, "He said these specialists were all in together. So he said he had been living on a high table-land, I think he said in East Africa, and told him he was soon going back, and how would he stand it? The difficulty was the doctor kept asking him how many feet above sea-level, and Turner could only say he didn't know; but he described the feel of the air pretty well, and the specialist pounded his heart, and what Turner arrived at in the end was that five to ten weeks would be about his limit. You see he couldn't live in the aeroplane, breathing his compressed air, because he wanted that for his return journey."

"Heart bad?" I asked.

"No," said Jorkens, "but you can't go to certain altitudes after a certain age, so they say. And the air of Mars seems to be like what we keep on our highest mountain tops."

We were walking back to the club, and now we arrived there, and we went in and talked of Turner, all alone at the time when no one is there, between

lunch and dinner. We neither of us dined there that night, we fixed on a train to take us to Ketling next day, and I went to bed early. All night my mind was full, and my dreams troubled, with hideous pictures of the slugly beast.

Well, next day Jorkens and I met at Waterloo Station, and went down to Ketling together in the afternoon. Was it possible to dissuade him, I asked Jorkens. And Jorkens said: "Quite impossible."

After that we talked a little: I for one was too full of uneasy apprehensions.

At Ketling there was Turner, dressed for his journey, and walking about smoking.

"When?" I asked him.

"When Mars rises," he said.

Jorkens talked alone with him then, but, whatever final arrangements they were making, dissuasion was evidently out of the question. Presently a mechanic came up and interrupted them, and I rejoined them then, just as the mechanic said: "Where are you off to, sir?" And I heard Turner say: "I'm going to investigate the composition of the upper air currents."

And I saw that he had learned to talk nonsense, where truth would have been taken for craziness, which is one of the things that the cleverest men never learn.

And then he turned, and began talking earnestly to Jorkens again. And this time I heard what he was talking about: it was all about his bullets. "At the tip," he was saying, "I have the softest lead that is made, and of course quite hollow. The beasts are all soft themselves; those expanding bullets will play hell with them."

I didn't especially disapprove of this gloating, at least not to the extent of showing disapproval in my face; and yet he must have seen some such expression on me, for he turned to me and said quietly: "You haven't seen these beasts. And you haven't seen the way they treat men."

He was perfectly right, and I told him so.

And evening wore away, and we had a brief meal together in an inn that there was a little way from the aerodrome. There was a good deal of silence at that supper, and a drink or two to the dim future, without much said. When we came out it was night. A few last preparations by Turner, and then all three of us were standing silent, watching the line of the hills. And over the hills came the enemy.

You've all seen Mars rise, so there's little to tell you, except that he was larger than he usually is, and except that we probably looked at him with

different feelings with which any other three men had ever watched him before. Only Turner seemed to be regarding him calmly.

And then Turner got into his plane which was there on the landing ground all ready for him, with its head pointing straight to the ruddy light of Mars, like a huge moth eyeing a flame. And we shut the door that was to remain shut on him for a month in that cramped enclosure. Then they started his propeller and the thing ran forward roaring, and lifted and was off to the red star.

He should have had lights, and as only he knew how useless they would be he must have had some difficulty in leaving Ketling without them, but he certainly had none, so that soon we lost the dark bulk of the aeroplane in the night. But before we quite lost the roar of it we heard it curving round to the left and coming back towards us, and very soon it was down again on the landing-ground. We ran up and asked what he wanted, and he showed by signs through the thick glass that he wished to correct his aim. I often wondered if that was really the reason, or if what Turner wanted was to have one more look at Earth. Whatever it was, he was off again almost at once, and this time sight and sound of his plane were soon lost to us, as we stood there gazing towards Mars. For nearly ten minutes we stood there without moving, gazing at the star that seemed crouching over the hills. Mechanics began to look curiously at us. And then, as small as a star, yet wonderfully clear, the brightest speck of colour among a million lights, the first of Turner's rockets shone out to the right of Mars. Another and then another, gaudily trespassing on the calm of the night. He was gaining the speed that before he left our air was to wrench him free of the ancient course of Earth; for he was aiming a little wider than our orbit, on such a bearing that, hurled through space by the force of Earth's journey, he would meet Mars travelling outside us. In the same way when Earth got ahead, as she would in a few weeks, he meant to return, hurled back by the pace of Mars. But to break free from the ancient journey* of either Earth or Mars he needed the power of an enormous speed, to gain which he was firing rockets. When the rockets ceased we knew he was nearing Earth's outermost limit, that boundary-fence of thin air on the other side of which lies nothing whatever. And then after the last of the rockets, a single gay green light fell from the direction that Turner had taken, floating downward as slowly as though it scorned gravity. It was Turner's farewell to our planet.

A month to go, a month to return, and five weeks there, gave us the date by which he must be back if we were ever to see him again. It had not needed

Jorkens' or my advice to urge him to bring back copious and incontrovertible proofs of his journey to Mars this time. He was not going to be doubted again. Meanwhile he had told nobody but us two. And both of us kept his secret.

We went seldom to the Club; I think Jorkens felt as I did, that there was only one thing worth talking about, and that was a secret from everybody except each other. So we only talked to each other. I saw a lot of Jorkens in those days. At first we were full of plans as to how Turner was to be introduced to the world. We came to realize that to bring him before great audiences in London, New York and Paris would be little better than hiding him in a village. The whole world would want to see him. Oh, the plans we made. But as the weeks wore on we spoke less and less of what Turner was to do in Tokio, Delhi or Brussels, and more of the probable outcome of his encounter with the slugly beast, as it called itself. I often told Jorkens, we often told each other, that there was no need for anxiety until the very last day, because he was certain to stay till the very last in order to gratify as widely as possible the quiet calm loathing that he felt for these foul things that had challenged him.

And then the day arrived, a huge red sunset and the air full of the threat of winter. We both of us telephoned frequently to Ketling, wrapping up our inquiries for Turner as well as we could, without any hint of Mars. Ketling knew nothing of him. I don't think I spoke to anyone except Jorkens next day. There was just the chance of his having landed on some distant part of our planet, but when no news whatever came of any such airman in any part of our world we gave up hope in a week.

Jorkens and I still met and talked alone. Every evening in his rooms we used to sit and talk about Turner till midnight or the small hours. And gradually as we talked we put together a theory that those soft flabby beasts, so vulnerable to bullets, must have got some deadly weapon or other means of destruction, before they sent that provocative message to Turner. Piecing together everything we knew about Turner, and everything he had told us of Mars, the state of his health, the rarity of the air, the powers and appetites of those revolting creatures, and working out the details of what had happened like two men analyzing a game of chess, or planning a campaign, we came to decide that Turner must have been overpowered by numbers, and prevented by something of which neither he nor we could know anything from using his machine-gun and pistols with their hollow-pointed bullets. And now that Mars had passed out of reach of Earth, to be gone apart from us for another seven years, we assumed that Turner was dead, an assumption for which we

obtained legal sanction without any mention of Mars. And there was a memorial service for him in London, which many airmen attended, for he had credit at least for the flights that he had made on this earth. All that was known to the clergyman who preached briefly on this occasion, all that was known to anyone but Jorkens and me, was that Turner had left the aerodrome at night, and his end had its place with the fates of those who had been swallowed up in mystery. The clergyman spoke awhile of the vivid present, and then of the mystery that surrounds all of us. Jorkens and I of course were there, and we each left a wreath that day at his old rooms near Charing Cross Road, and the old charwoman that tidies the rooms had left a bunch of flowers there in a glass on his table, which I felt was the last farewell that the world took of Turner.

And then next day there came a message in plain Morse from an unknown station, a message followed by Turner's initials, A. V. T.: several stations got it and many private sets, and no one knew where it came from: and Jorkens got it on Turner's own set that he had kept for him all those weeks, fixed at a certain wave-length that Turner had given him, and with the 'stop out night and day. It said: "Victory. Victory. Victory."

The Cairn on the Headland by Robert E. Howard

We who read stories of evil spirits, ghosts, demons and hellish monsters sometimes forget that if you accept the possibilities of such dark forces of evil, then you must also allow the corollary, the existence of forces for good, for light against dark. In this story, which is one of the most powerful tales Robert E. Howard ever wrote, the author makes unexpected use of such powers to answer as dark a challenge as fiction ever presented.

"And the next instant this great red loon was shaking me like a dog shaking a rat. 'Where is Meve MacDonnal?' he was screaming. By the saints, it's a grisly thing to hear a madman in a lonely place at midnight screaming the name of a woman dead three hundred years."

—THE LONGSHOREMAN'S TALE.



HIS IS THE cairn you seek," I said, laying my hand gingerly on one of the rough stones which composed the strangely symmetrical heap.

An avid interest burned in Ortali's dark eyes. His gaze swept the landscape and came back to rest on the great pile of massive weather-worn boulders.

"What a wild, weird, desolate place!" he said. "Who would have thought to find such a spot in this vicinity? Except for the smoke rising yonder, one would scarcely dream that beyond that headland lies a great city! Here there is scarcely even a fisherman's hut within sight."

"The people shun the cairn as they have shunned it for centuries," I replied.

"Why?"

"You've asked me that before," I replied impatiently. "I can only answer that they now avoid by habit what their ancestors avoided through knowledge."

"Knowledge!" he laughed derisively. "Superstition!"

I looked at him somberly with unveiled hate. Two men could scarcely have been of more opposite types. He was slender, self-possessed, unmistakably Latin with his dark eyes and sophisticated air. I am massive, clumsy and bearlike, with cold blue eyes and tousled red hair. We were countrymen in that we were born in the same land; but the homelands of our ancestors were as far apart as South from North.

"Nordic superstition," he repeated. "I cannot imagine a Latin people allowing such a mystery as this to go unexplored all these years. The Latins are too practical—too prosaic, if you will. Are you sure of the date of this pile?"

"I find no mention of it in any manuscript prior to 1014 A. D.," I growled, "and I've read all such manuscripts extant, in the original. MacLiag, King Brian Boru's poet speaks of the rearing of the cairn immediately after the battle, and there can be little doubt that this is the pile referred to. It is men-

tioned briefly in the later chronicles of the Four Masters, also in the Book of Leinster, compiled in the late 1150's, and again in the Book of Lecan, compiled by the MacFirbis about 1416. All connect it with the battle of Clontarf, without mentioning why it was built."

"Well, what is the mystery about it?" he queried. "What more natural than that the defeated Norseman should rear a cairn above the body of some great chief who had fallen in the battle?"

"In the first place," I answered, "there is a mystery concerning the existence of it. The building of cairns above the dead was a Norse, not an Irish, custom. Yet according to the chroniclers, it was not Norsemen who reared this heap. How could they have built it immediately after the battle, in which they had been cut to pieces and driven in headlong flight through the gates of Dublin? Their chieftains lay where they had fallen and the ravens picked their bones. It was Irish hands that heaped these stones."

"Well, was that so strange?" persisted Ortali. "In old times the Irish heaped up stones before they went into battle, each man putting a stone in place; after the battle the living removed their stones, leaving in that manner a simple tally of the slain for any who wished to count the remaining stones."

I shook my head.

"That was in more ancient times; not in the battle of Clontarf. In the first place, there were more than twenty thousand warriors, and four thousand fell here; this cairn is not large enough to have served as a tally of the men killed in battle. And it is too symmetrically built. Hardly a stone has fallen away in all these centuries. No, it was reared to cover something."

"Nordic superstitions!" the man sneered again.

"Aye, superstitions if you will!" fired by his scorn, I exclaimed so savagely that he involuntarily stepped back, his hand slipping inside his coat. "We of North Europe had gods and demons before which the pallid mythologies of the South fade to childishness. At a time when your ancestors were lolling on silken cushions among the crumbling marble pillars of a decaying civilization, my ancestors were building their own civilization in hardships and gigantic battles against foes human and inhuman.

"Here on this very plain the Dark Ages came to an end and the light of a new era dawned on a world of hate and anarchy. Here, as even you know, in the year 1014, Brian Boru and his Dalcassian ax wielders broke the power of the heathen Norsemen forever—those grim anarchistic plunderers who had held back the progress of civilization for centuries.

"It was more than a struggle between Gael and Dane for the crown of Ire-

land. It was a war between the White Christ and Odin, between Christian and pagan. It was the last stand of the heathen—of the people of the old, grim ways. For three hundred years the world had writhed beneath the heel of the Viking, and here on Clontarf that scourge was lifted forever.

"Then, as now, the importance of that battle was underestimated by polite Latin and Latinized writers and historians. The polished sophisticates of the civilized cities of the South were not interested in the battles of barbarians in the remote northwestern corner of the world—a place and peoples of whose very names they were only vaguely aware. They only knew that suddenly the terrible raids of the sea kings ceased to sweep along their coasts, and in another century the wild age of plunder and slaughter had almost been forgotten—all because a rude, half-civilized people who scantily covered their nakedness with wolf hides rose up against the conquerors.

"Here was Ragnarok, the fall of the Gods! Here in very truth Odin fell, for his religion was given its death blow. He was last of all the heathen gods to stand before Christianity, and it looked for a time as if his children might prevail and plunge the world back into darkness and savagery. Before Clontarf, legends say, he often appeared on earth to his worshipers, dimly seen in the smoke of the sacrifices where naked human victims died screaming, or riding the wind-torn clouds, his wild locks flying in the gale, or, appareled like a Norse warrior, dealing thunderous blows in the forefront of nameless battles. But after Clontarf he was seen no more; his worshipers called on him in vain with wild chants and grim sacrifices. They lost faith in him, who had failed them in their wildest hour; his altars crumbled, his priests turned gray and died, and men turned to his conqueror, the White Christ. The reign of blood and iron was forgotten; the age of the red-handed sea kings passed. The rising sun slowly, dimly, lighted the night of the Dark Ages, and men forgot Odin, who came no more on earth.

"Aye, laugh if you will! But who knows what shapes of horror have had birth in the darkness, the cold gloom, and the whistling black gulfs of the North? In the southern lands the sun shines and flowers blow; under the soft skies men laugh at demons. But in the North who can say what elemental spirits of evil dwell in the fierce storms and the darkness? Well may it be that from such fiends of the night men evolved the worship of the grim ones, Odin and Thor, and their terrible kin."

Ortali was silent for an instant, as if taken aback by my vehemence; then he laughed. "Well said, my Northern philosopher! We will argue these questions another time. I could hardly expect a descendant of Nordic barbarians to

escape some trace of the dreams and mysticism of his race. But you cannot expect me to be moved by your imaginings, either. I still believe that this cairn covers no grimmer secret than a Norse chief who fell in the battle—and really your ravings concerning Nordic devils have no bearing on the matter. Will you help me tear into this cairn?”

“No,” I answered shortly.

“A few hours’ work will suffice to lay bare whatever it may hide,” he continued as if he had not heard. “By the way, speaking of superstitions, is there not some wild tale concerning holly connected with this heap?”

“An old legend says that all trees bearing holly were cut down for a league in all directions, for some mysterious reason,” I answered sullenly. “That’s another mystery. Holly was an important part of Norse magic-making. The Four Masters tell of a Norseman—a white-bearded ancient of wild aspect, and apparently a priest of Odin—who was slain by the natives while attempting to lay a branch of holly on the cairn, a year after the battle.”

“Well,” he laughed, “I have procured a sprig of holly—see?—and shall wear it in my lapel; perhaps it will protect me against your Nordic devils. I feel more certain than ever that the cairn covers a sea king—and they were always laid to rest with all their riches: golden cups and jewel-set sword hilts and silver corselets. I feel that this cairn holds wealth, wealth over which clumsy-footed Irish peasants have been stumbling for centuries, living in want and dying in hunger. Bah! We shall return here at about midnight, when we may be fairly certain that we will not be interrupted—and you will aid me at the excavations.”

The last sentence was rapped out in a tone that sent a red surge of blood-lust through my brain. Ortali turned and began examining the cairn as he spoke, and almost involuntarily my hand reached out stealthily and closed on a wicked bit of jagged stone that had become detached from one of the boulders. In that instant I was a potential murderer if ever one walked the earth. One blow, quick, silent and savage, and I would be free forever from a slavery bitter as my Celtic ancestors knew beneath the heels of the Vikings.

As if sensing my thoughts, Ortali wheeled to face me. I quickly slipped the stone into my pocket, not knowing whether he noted the action. But he must have seen the red killing instinct burning in my eyes, for again he recoiled and again his hand sought the hidden revolver.

But he only said: “I’ve changed my mind. We will not uncover the cairn tonight. Tomorrow night perhaps. We may be spied upon. Just now I am going back to the hotel.”

I made no reply, but turned my back upon him and stalked moodily away in the direction of the shore. He started up the slope of the headland beyond which lay the city, and when I turned to look at him, he was just crossing the ridge, etched clearly against the hazy sky. If hate could kill, he would have dropped dead. I saw him in a red-tinged haze, and the pulses in my temples throbbed like hammers.

I turned back toward the shore, and stopped suddenly. Engrossed with my own dark thoughts, I had approached within a few feet of a woman before seeing her. She was tall and strongly made, with a strong stern face, deeply lined and weather-worn as the hills. She was dressed in a manner strange to me, but I thought little of it, knowing the curious styles of clothing worn by certain backward types of our people.

"What would you be doing at the cairn?" she asked in a deep, powerful voice. I looked at her in surprise; she spoke in Gaelic, which was not strange of itself, but the Gaelic she used I had supposed was extinct as a spoken language: it was the Gaelic of scholars, pure, and with a distinctly archaic flavor. A woman from some secluded hill country, I thought, where the people still spoke the unadulterated tongue of their ancestors.

"We were speculating on its mystery," I answered in the same tongue, hesitantly, however, for though skilled in the more modern form taught in the schools, to match her use of the language was a strain on my knowledge of it. She shook her head slowly. "I like not the dark man who was with you," she said somberly. "Who are you?"

"I am an American, though born and raised here," I answered. "My name is James O'Brien."

A strange light gleamed in her cold eyes.

"O'Brien? You are of my clan. I was born an O'Brien. I married a man of the MacDonnals, but my heart was ever with the folk of my blood."

"You live hereabouts?" I queried, my mind on her unusual accent.

"Aye, I lived here upon a time," she answered, "but I have been far away for a long time. All is changed—changed. I would not have returned, but I was drawn back by a call you would not understand. Tell me, would you open the cairn?"

I started and gazed at her closely, deciding that she had somehow overheard our conversation.

"It is not mine to say," I answered bitterly. "Ortali—my companion—he will doubtless open it, and I am constrained to aid him. Of my own will I would not molest it."

Her cold eyes bored into my soul.

"Fools rush blind to their doom," she said somberly. "What does this man know of the mysteries of this ancient land? Deeds have been done here whereof the world reëchoed. Yonder, in the long ago, when Tomar's Wood rose dark and rustling against the plain of Clontarf, and the Danish walls of Dublin loomed south of the river Liffey, the ravens fed on the slain and the setting sun lighted lakes of crimson. There King Brian, your ancestor and mine, broke the spears of the North. From all lands they came, and from the isles of the sea; they came in gleaming mail and their horned helmets cast long shadows across the land. Their dragon-prows thronged the waves and the sound of their oars was as the beat of a storm.

"On yonder plain the heroes fell like ripe wheat before the reaper. There fell Jarl Sigurd of the Orkneys, and Brodir of Man, last of the sea kings, and all their chiefs. There fell, too, Prince Murrough and his son, Turlogh, and many chieftains of the Gael, and King Brian Boru himself, Erin's mightiest monarch."

"True!" My imagination was always fired by the epic tales of the land of my birth. "Blood of mine was spilled here, and, though I have passed the best part of my life in a far land, there are ties of blood to bind my soul to this shore."

She nodded slowly, and from beneath her robes drew forth something that sparkled dully in the setting sun.

"Take this," she said. "As a token of blood tie, I give it to you. I feel the weird of strange and monstrous happenings—but this will keep you safe from evil and the people of the night. Beyond reckoning of man, it is holy."

I took it, wonderingly. It was a crucifix of curiously worked gold, set with tiny jewels. The workmanship was extremely archaic and unmistakably Celtic. And vaguely within me stirred a memory of a long-lost relic described by forgotten monks in dim manuscripts.

"Great heavens!" I exclaimed. "This is—this must be—this *can* be nothing less than the lost crucifix of Saint Brandon the Blessed!"

"Aye." She inclined her grim head. "Saint Brandon's cross, fashioned by the hands of the holy man in long ago, before the Norse barbarians made Erin a red hell—in the days when a golden peace and holiness ruled the land."

"But, woman!" I exclaimed wildly, "I cannot accept this as a gift from you! You cannot know its value! Its intrinsic worth alone is equal to a fortune; as a relic it is priceless—"

"Enough!" Her deep voice struck me suddenly silent. "Have done with such—"

talk, which is sacrilege. The cross of Saint Brandon is beyond price. It was never stained with gold; only as a free gift has it ever changed hands. I give it to you to shield you against the powers of evil. Say no more."

"But it has been lost for three hundred years!" I exclaimed. "How—where . . .?"

"A holy man gave it to me long ago," she answered. "I hid it in my bosom—long it lay in my bosom. But now I give it to you; I have come from a far country to give it to you, for there are monstrous happenings in the wind, and it is sword and shield against the people of the night. An ancient evil stirs in its prison, which blind hands of folly may break open; but stronger than any evil is the cross of Saint Brandon which has gathered power and strength through the long, long ages since that forgotten evil fell to the earth."

"But who are you?" I exclaimed.

"I am Meve MacDonnal," she answered.

Then, turning without a word, she strode away in the deepening twilight while I stood bewildered and watched her cross the headland and pass from sight, turning inland as she topped the ridge. Then I, too, shaking myself like a man waking from a dream, went slowly up the slope and across the headland. When I crossed the ridge it was as if I had passed out of one world into another: behind me lay the wilderness and desolation of a weird medieval age; before me pulsed the lights and the roar of modern Dublin. Only one archaic touch was lent to the scene before me: some distance inland loomed the straggling and broken lines of an ancient graveyard, long deserted and grown up in weeds, barely discernible in the dusk. As I looked I saw a tall figure moving ghostily among the crumbling tombs, and I shook my head bewilderedly. Surely Meve MacDonnal was touched with madness, living in the past, like one seeking to stir to flame the ashes of dead yesterdays. I set out toward where, in the near distance, began the straggling window-gleams that grew into the swarming ocean of lights that was Dublin.

Back at the suburban hotel where Ortali and I had our rooms, I did not speak to him of the cross the woman had given me. In that at least he should not share. I intended keeping it until she requested its return, which I felt sure she would do. Now as I recalled her appearance, the strangeness of her costume returned to me, with one item which had impressed itself on my subconscious mind at the time, but which I had not consciously realized. Meve MacDonnal had been wearing sandals of a type not worn in Ireland for centuries. Well, it was perhaps natural that with her retrospective nature she

should imitate the apparel of the past ages which seemed to claim all her thoughts.

I turned the cross reverently in my hands. There was no doubt that it was the very cross for which antiquarians had searched so long in vain, and at last in despair had denied the existence of. The priestly scholar, Michael O'Rourke, in a treatise written about 1690, described the relic at length, chronicled its history exhaustively and maintained that it was last heard of in the possession of Bishop Liam O'Brien, who, dying in 1595, gave it into the keeping of a kinswoman; but who this woman was, it was never known, and O'Rourke maintained that she kept her possession of the cross a secret, and that it was laid away with her in her tomb.

At another time my elation at discovering this relic would have been extreme, but, at the time, my mind was too filled with hate and smoldering fury. Replacing the cross in my pocket, I fell moodily to reviewing my connections with Ortali, connections which puzzled my friends, but which were simple enough.

Some years before I had been connected with a certain large university in a humble way. One of the professors with whom I worked—a man named Reynolds—was of intolerably overbearing disposition toward those whom he considered his inferiors. I was a poverty-ridden student striving for life in a system which makes the very existence of a scholar precarious. I bore Professor Reynolds' abuse as long as I could, but one day we clashed. The reason does not matter; it was trivial enough in itself. Because I dared reply to his insults, Reynolds struck me and I knocked him senseless.

That very day he caused my dismissal from the university. Facing not only an abrupt termination of my work and studies, but actual starvation, I was reduced to desperation, and I went to Reynolds' study late that night intending to thrash him within an inch of his life. I found him alone in his study, but the moment I entered, he sprang up and rushed at me like a wild beast, with a dagger he used for a paperweight. I did not strike him; I did not even touch him. As I stepped aside to avoid his rush, a small rug slipped beneath his charging feet. He fell headlong, and, to my horror, in his fall the dagger in his hand was driven into his heart. He died instantly. I was at once aware of my position. I was known to have quarreled, and even exchanged blows with the man. I had every reason to hate him. If I were found in the study with the dead man, no jury in the world would not believe that I had murdered him. I hurriedly left by the way I had come, thinking that I had been unobserved. But Ortali, the dead man's secretary, had seen me. Returning from a

dance, he had observed me entering the premises, and, following me, had seen the whole affair through the window. But this I did not know until later.

The body was found by the professor's housekeeper, and naturally there was a great stir. Suspicion pointed to me, but lack of evidence kept me from being indicted, and this same lack of evidence brought about a verdict of suicide. All this time Ortali had kept quiet. Now he came to me and disclosed what he knew. He knew, of course, that I had not killed Reynolds, but he could prove that I was in the study when the professor met his death, and I knew Ortali was capable of carrying out his threat of swearing that he had seen me murder Reynolds in cold blood. And thus began a systematic blackmail.

I venture to say that a stranger blackmail was never levied. I had no money then; Ortali was gambling on my future, for he was assured of my abilities. He advanced me money, and, by clever wire-pulling, got me an appointment in a large college. Then he sat back to reap the benefits of his scheming, and he reaped full fold of the seed he sowed. In my line I became eminently successful. I soon commanded an enormous salary in my regular work, and I received rich prizes and awards for researches of various difficult nature, and of these Ortali took the lion's share—in money at least. I seemed to have the Midas touch. Yet of the wine of my success I tasted only the dregs.

I scarcely had a cent to my name. The money that had flowed through my hands had gone to enrich my slaver, unknown to the world. A man of remarkable gifts, he could have gone to the heights in any line, but for a queer streak in him, which, coupled with an inordinately avaricious nature, made him a parasite, a blood-sucking leech.

This trip to Dublin had been in the nature of a vacation for me. I was worn out with study and labor. But he had somehow heard of Grimmin's Cairn, as it was called, and, like a vulture that scents dead flesh, he conceived himself on the track of hidden gold. A golden wine cup would have been, to him, sufficient reward for the labor of tearing into the pile, and reason enough for desecrating or even destroying the ancient landmark. He was a swine whose only god was gold.

Well, I thought grimly, as I disrobed for bed, all things end, both good and bad. Such a life as I had lived was unbearable. Ortali had dangled the gallows before my eyes until it had lost its terrors. I had staggered beneath the load I carried because of my love for my work. But all human endurance has its limits. My hands turned to iron as I thought of Ortali, working beside me at midnight at the lonely cairn. One stroke, with such a stone as I had caught

up that day, and my agony would be ended. That life and hopes and career and ambitions would be ended as well, could not be helped. Ah, what a sorry, sorry end to all my high dreams! When a rope and the long drop through the black trap should cut short an honorable career and a useful life! And all because of a human vampire who feasted his rotten lust on my soul, and drove me to murder and ruin.

But I knew my fate was written in the iron books of doom. Sooner or later I would turn on Ortali and kill him, be the consequences what they might. And I had reached the end of my road. Continual torture had rendered me, I believe, partly insane. I knew that at Grimmin's Cairn, when we toiled at midnight, Ortali's life would end beneath my hands, and my own life be cast away.

Something fell out of my pocket and I picked it up. It was the piece of sharp stone I had caught up off the cairn. Looking at it moodily, I wondered what strange hands had touched it in old times, and what grim secret it helped to hide on the bare headland of Grimmin. I switched out the light and lay in the darkness, the stone still in my hand, forgotten, occupied with my own dark broodings. And I glided gradually into deep slumber.

At first I was aware that I was dreaming, as people often are. All was dim and vague, and connected in some strange way, I realized, with the bit of stone still grasped in my sleeping hand. Gigantic, chaotic scenes and landscapes and events shifted before me, like clouds that rolled and tumbled before a gale. Slowly these settled and crystallized into one distinct landscape, familiar and yet wildly strange. I saw a broad bare plain, fringed by the gray sea on one side, and a dark, rustling forest on the other; this plain was cut by a winding river, and beyond this river I saw a city—such a city as my waking eyes had never seen: bare, stark, massive, with the grim architecture of an earlier, wilder age. On the plain I saw, as in a mist, a mighty battle. Serried ranks rolled backward and forward, steel flashed like a sunlit sea, and men fell like ripe wheat beneath the blades. I saw men in wolfskins, wild and shock-headed, wielding dripping axes, and tall men in horned helmets and glittering mail, whose eyes were cold and blue as the sea. And I saw myself.

Yes, in my dream I saw and recognized, in a semi-detached way, myself. I was tall and rangily powerful; I was shock-headed and naked but for a wolf hide girt about my loins. I ran among the ranks yelling and smiting with a red ax, and blood ran down my flanks from wounds I scarcely felt. My eyes were cold blue and my shaggy hair and beard were red.

Now for an instant I was cognizant of my dual personality, aware that I

was at once the wild man who ran and smote with the gory ax, and the man who slumbered and dreamed across the centuries. But this sensation quickly faded. I was no longer aware of any personality other than that of the barbarian who ran and smote. James O'Brien had no existence; I was Red Cumal, kern of Brian Boru, and my ax was dripping with the blood of my foes.

The roar of conflict was dying away, though here and there struggling clumps of warriors still dotted the plain. Down along the river half-naked tribesmen, waist-deep in reddening water, tore and slashed with helmeted warriors whose mail could not save them from the stroke of the Dalcassian ax. Across the river a bloody, disorderly horde was staggering through the gates of Dublin.

The sun was sinking low toward the horizon. All day I had fought beside the chiefs. I had seen Jarl Sigurd fall beneath Prince Murrough's sword. I had seen Murrough himself die in the moment of victory, by the hand of a grim mailed giant whose name none knew. I had seen, in the flight of the enemy, Brodir and King Brian fall together at the door of the great king's tent.

Aye, it had been a feasting of ravens, a red flood of slaughter, and I knew that no more would the dragon-prowed fleets sweep from the blue North with torch and destruction. Far and wide the Vikings lay in their glittering mail, as the ripe wheat lies after the reaping. Among them lay thousands of bodies clad in the wolf hides of the tribes, but the dead of the Northern people far outnumbered the dead of Erin. I was weary and sick of the stench of raw blood. I had glutted my soul with slaughter; now I sought plunder. And I found it—on the corpse of a richly-clad Norse chief which lay close to the seashore. I tore off the silver-scaled corselet, the horned helmet. They fitted as it made for me, and I swaggered among the dead, calling on my wild comrades to admire my appearance, though the harness felt strange to me, for the Gaels scorned armor and fought half-naked.

In my search for loot I had wandered far out on the plain, away from the river, but still the mail-clad bodies lay thickly strewn, for the bursting of the ranks had scattered fugitives and pursuers all over the countryside, from the dark waving Wood of Tomar, to the river and the seashore. And on the seaward slope of Drumna's headland, out of sight of the city and the plain of Clontarf, I came suddenly upon a dying warrior. He was tall and massive, clad in gray mail. He lay partly in the folds of a great dark cloak, and his sword lay broken near his mighty right hand. His horned helmet had fallen from his head and his elf-locks blew in the wind that swept out of the west.

Where one eye should have been was an empty socket and the other eye -

glittered cold and grim as the North Sea, though it was glazing with approach of death. Blood oozed from a rent in his corselet. I approached him warily, a strange cold fear, that I could not understand, gripping me. Ax ready to dash out his brains, I bent over him, and recognized him as the chief who had slain Prince Murrough, and who had mown down the warriors of the Gael like a harvest. Wherever he had fought, the Norsemen had prevailed, but in all other parts of the field, the Gaels had been irresistible.

And now he spoke to me in Norse and I understood, for had I not toiled as slave among the sea people for long bitter years?

"The Christians have overcome," he gasped in a voice whose timbre, though low-pitched, sent a curious shiver of fear through me; there was in it an undertone as of icy waves sweeping along a Northern shore, as of freezing winds whispering among the pine trees. "Doom and shadows stalk on Asgaard and here has fallen Ragnarok. I could not be in all parts of the field at once, and now I am wounded unto death. A spear—a spear with a cross carved in the blade; no other weapon could wound me."

I realized that the chief, seeing mistily my red beard and the Norse armor I wore, supposed me to be one of his own race. But crawling horror surged darkly in the depths of my soul.

"White Christ, thou hast not yet conquered," he muttered deliriously. "Lift me up, man, and let me speak to you."

Now for some reason I complied, and as I lifted him to a sitting posture, I shuddered and my flesh crawled at the feel of him, for his flesh was like ivory—smoother and harder than is natural for human flesh, and colder than even a dying man should be.

"I die as men die," he muttered. "Fool, to assume the attributes of mankind, even though it was to aid the people who deify me. The gods are immortal, but flesh can perish, even when it clothes a god. Haste and bring a sprig of the magic plant—even holly—and lay it on my bosom. Aye, though it be no larger than a dagger point, it will free me from this fleshly prison I put on when I came to war with men with their own weapons. And I will shake off this flesh and stalk once more among the thundering clouds. Woe, then, to all men who bend not the knee to me! Haste; I will await your coming."

His lionlike head fell back, and feeling shudderingly under his corselet, I could distinguish no heartbeat. He was dead, as men die, but I knew that locked in that semblance of a human body, there but slumbered the spirit of a fiend of the frost and darkness.

Aye, I knew him: Odin, the Gray Man, the One-eyed, the god of the North

who had taken the form of a warrior to fight for his people. Assuming the form of a human he was subject to many of the limitations of humanity. All men knew this of the gods, who often walked the earth in the guise of men. Odin, clothed in human semblance, could be wounded by certain weapons, and even slain, but a touch of the mysterious holly would rouse him in grisly resurrection. This task he had set me, not knowing me for an enemy; in human form he could only use human faculties, and these had been impaired by onstriding death.

My hair stood up and my flesh crawled. I tore from my body the Norse armor, and fought a wild panic that prompted me to run blind and screaming with terror across the plain. Nauseated with fear, I gathered boulders and heaped them for a rude couch, and on it, shaking with horror, I lifted the body of the Norse god. And as the sun set and the stars came silently out, I was working with fierce energy, piling huge rocks above the corpse. Other tribesmen came up and I told them of what I was sealing up—I hoped forever. And they, shivering with horror, fell to aiding me. No sprig of magic holly should be laid on Odin's terrible bosom. Beneath these rude stones the Northern demon should slumber until the thunder of Judgment Day, forgotten by the world which had once cried out beneath his iron heel. Yet not wholly forgot, for, as we labored, one of my comrades said: "This shall be no longer Drumna's Headland, but the Headland of the Gray Man."

That phrase established a connection between my dream-self and my sleeping self. I started up from sleep exclaiming: "Gray Man's Headland!"

I looked about dazedly, the furnishings of the room, faintly lighted by the starlight in the windows, seeming strange and unfamiliar until I slowly oriented myself with time and space.

"Gray Man's Headland," I repeated, "Gray Man—Graymin—Grimmin—Grimmin's Headland! Great God, the thing under the cairn!"

Shaken, I sprang up, and realized that I still gripped the piece of stone from the cairn. It is well known that inanimate objects retain psychic associations. A round stone from the plain of Jericho has been placed in the hand of a hypnotized medium, and she has at once reconstructed in her mind the battle and siege of the city, and the shattering fall of the walls. I did not doubt that this bit of stone had acted as a magnet to drag my modern mind through the mists of the centuries into a life I had known before.

I was more shaken than I can describe, for the whole fantastic affair fitted in too well with certain formless vague sensations concerning the cairn which had already lingered at the back of my mind, to be dismissed as an unusually

vivid dream. I felt the need of a glass of wine, and remembered that Ortali always had wine in his room. I hurriedly donned my clothes, opened my door, crossed the corridor and was about to knock at Ortali's door, when I noticed that it was partly open, as if some one had neglected to close it carefully. I entered, switching on a light. The room was empty.

I realized what had occurred. Ortali mistrusted me; he feared to risk himself alone with me in a lonely spot at midnight. He had postponed the visit to the cairn, merely to trick me, to give him a chance to slip away alone.

My hatred for Ortali was for the moment completely submerged by a wild panic of horror at the thought of what the opening of the cairn might result in. For I did not doubt the authenticity of my dream. It was no dream; it was a fragmentary bit of memory, in which I had relived that other life of mine. Gray Man's Headland—Grimmin's Headland, and under those rough stones that grisly corpse in its semblance of humanity—I could not hope that, imbued with the imperishable essence of an elemental spirit, that corpse had crumbled to dust in the ages.

Of my race out of the city and across those semi-desolate reaches, I remember little. The night was a cloak of horror through which peered red stars like the gloating eyes of uncanny beasts, and my footfalls echoed hollowly so that repeatedly I thought some monster loped at my heels.

The straggling lights fell away behind me and I entered the region of mystery and horror. No wonder that progress had passed to the right and to the left of this spot, leaving it untouched, a blind back-eddy given over to goblin-dreams and nightmare memories. Well that so few suspected its very existence.

Dimly I saw the headland, but fear gripped me and held me aloof. I had a vague, incoherent idea of finding the ancient woman, Meve MacDonnal. She was grown old in the mysteries and traditions of the mysterious land. She could aid me, if indeed the blind fool Ortali loosed on the world the forgotten demon men once worshiped in the North.

A figure loomed suddenly in the starlight and I caromed against him, almost upsetting him. A stammering voice in a thick brogue protested with the petulance of intoxication. It was a burly longshoreman returning to his cottage, no doubt, from some late revel in a tavern. I seized him and shook him, my eyes glaring wildly in the starlight.

"I am looking for Meve MacDonnal! Do you know her? Tell me, you fool! Do you know old Meve MacDonnal?"

It was as if my words sobered him as suddenly as a dash of icy water in

his face. In the starlight I saw his face glimmer whitely and a catch of fear was at his throat. He sought to cross himself with an uncertain hand.

"Meve MacDonnal? Are ye mad? What would ye be doin' with *her*?"

"Tell me!" I shrieked, shaking him savagely. "Where is Meve MacDonnal?"

"There!" he gasped, pointing with a shaking hand where dimly in the night something loomed against the shadows. "In the name of the holy saints, begone, be ye madman or devil, and I've an honest man alone! There—there ye'll find Meve MacDonnal—where they laid her, full three hundred years ago!"

Half heeding his words I flung him aside with a fierce exclamation, and, as I raced across the weed-grown plain, I heard the sounds of his lumbering flight. Half blind with panic, I came to the low structure the man had pointed out. And floundering deep in weeds, my feet sinking into musty mold, I realized with a shock that I was in the ancient graveyard on the inland side of Grimmin's Headland, into which I had seen Meve MacDonnal disappear the evening before. I was close by the door of the largest tomb, and with an eery premonition I leaned close, seeking to make out the deeply-carven inscription. And partly by the dim light of the stars and partly by the touch of my tracing fingers, I made out the words and figures, in the half-forgotten Gaelic of three centuries ago: "Meve MacDonnal—1565-1640."

With a cry of horror I recoiled and, snatching out the crucifix she had given me, made to hurl it into the darkness—but it was as if an invisible hand caught my wrist. Madness and insanity—but I could not doubt: Meve MacDonnal had come to me from the tomb wherein she had rested for three hundred years to give me the ancient, ancient relic entrusted to her so long ago by her priestly kin. The memory of her words came to me, and the memory of Ortali and the Gray Man. From a lesser horror I turned squarely to a greater, and ran swiftly toward the headland which loomed dimly against the stars toward the sea.

As I crossed the ridge I saw, in the starlight, the cairn, and the figure that toiled gnomelike above it. Ortali, with his accustomed, almost super-human energy, had dislodged many of the boulders; and as I approached, shaking with horrified anticipation, I saw him tear aside the last layer, and I heard his savage cry of triumph, that froze me in my tracks some yards behind him, looking down from the slope. An unholy radiance rose from the cairn, and I saw, in the north, the aurora flame up suddenly with terrible beauty, paling the starlight. All about the cairn pulsed a weird light, turning the rough stones to a cold shimmering silver, and in this glow I saw Ortali, all

heedless, cast aside his pick and lean gloatingly over the aperture he had made—and I saw there the helmeted head, reposing on the couch of stones where I, Red Cumal, placed it so long ago. I saw the inhuman terror and beauty of that awesome carven face, in which was neither human weakness, pity nor mercy. I saw the soul-freezing glitter of the one eye, which stared wide open in a fearful semblance of life. All up and down the tall mailed figure shimmered and sparkled cold darts and gleams of icy light, like the northern lights that blazed in the shuddering skies. Aye, the Gray Man lay as I had left him more than nine hundred years before, without a trace of rust or rot or decay.

And now as Ortali leaned forward to examine his find, a gasping cry broke from my lips—for the sprig of holly worn in his lapel in defiance of "Nordic superstition," slipped from its place, and in the weird glow I plainly saw it fall upon the mighty mailed breast of the figure, where it blazed suddenly with a brightness too dazzling for human eyes. My cry was echoed by Ortali. The figure moved; the mighty limbs flexed, tumbling the shining stones aside. A new gleam lighted the terrible eye and a tide of life flooded and animated the carven features.

Out of the cairn he rose, and the northern lights played terribly about him. And the Gray Man changed and altered in horrific transmutation. The human features faded like a fading mask; the armor fell from his body and crumbled to dust as it fell; and the fiendish spirit of ice and frost and darkness that the sons of the North deified as Odin, stood nakedly and terribly in the stars. About his grisly head played lightnings and the shuddering gleams of the aurora. His towering anthropomorphic form was dark as shadow and gleaming as ice; his horrible crest reared colossally against the vaulting arch of the sky.

Ortali cowered, screaming wordlessly, as the taloned malformed hands reached for him. In the shadowy indescribable features of the Thing there was no tinge of gratitude toward the man who had released it—only a demoniac gloating and a demoniac hate for all the sons of men. I saw the shadowy arms shoot out and strike. I heard Ortali scream once—a single unbearable screech that broke short at the shrillest pitch. A single instant a blinding blue glare burst about him, lighting his convulsed features and his upward-rolling eyes; then his body was dashed earthward as by an electric shock, so savagely that I distinctly heard the splintering of his bones. But Ortali was dead before he touched the ground—dead, shriveled and blackened, exactly like a man blasted by a thunderbolt, to which cause, indeed, men later ascribed his death.

The slaying monster that had slain him lumbered now toward me, shadowy tentacle-like arms outspread, the pale starlight making a luminous pool of his great inhuman eye, his frightful talons dripping with I know not what elemental forces to blast the bodies and souls of men.

But I flinched not, and in that instant I feared him not, neither the horror of his countenance nor the threat of his thunderbolt dooms. For in a blinding white flame had come to me the realization of why Meve MacDonnal had come from her tomb to bring me the ancient cross which had lain in her bosom for three hundred years, gathering unto itself unseen forces of good and light, which war forever against the shapes of lunacy and shadow.

As I plucked from my garments the ancient cross, I felt the play of gigantic unseen forces in the air about me. I was but a pawn in the game—merely the hand that held the relic of holiness, that was the symbol of the powers opposed forever against the fiends of darkness. As I held it high, from it shot a single shaft of white light, unbearably pure, unbearably white, as if all the awesome forces of Light were combined in the symbol and loosed in one concentrated arrow of wrath against the monster of darkness. And with a hideous shriek the demon reeled back, shriveling before my eyes. Then with a great rush of vulture-like wings, he soared into the stars, dwindling, dwindling among the play of the flaming fires and the lights of the haunted skies, fleeing back into the dark limbo which gave him birth, God only knows how many grisly eons ago.

Aquella

by Donald A. Wollheim

A writer can only be guided in his own works by the emotion and feeling that the writing of it inspired in him. The writing of Aquella moved this writer deeply, and we gratefully noted a similar response from the readers after the story was first published. Aquella we feel to be a peculiarly timely story—just why you will understand for yourself after you've finished it.

W

HEN I SAW that beautiful blue planet shining in the sky before me, I felt that here was a place I ideally wished to set my space-yacht down and end my long wandering. Among the endless reaches of the stars, for many months I had traveled, idly, easily. My vacation was still young and I yearned for the pleasures of the myriad wonder worlds of space.

I had visited the shimmering coppery worlds of Altair, I had peeked into the caverns of Polaris. I had walked among the magnificent spanned cities of a hundred civilized planets and among the steaming jungles of a hundred colonial worlds. And yet, when I saw that globe, all blue with tranquil water and its little islands dotting the surface, I said to myself that here was the place to stop and relax. So I set my silvery ship down outside a small town that nestled by a lagoon on one of the larger islands.

As I emerged and the warm, flower-laden breeze wafted against my nostrils and the soft swishing of the green trees carried their message of peace to me, I rejoiced—for it was indeed a place of rest. And when the pink-skinned, golden-haired, sad-eyed people came and welcomed me, I was happy.

Aquilla was the name of the planet, they told me, and few were the strangers from the stars that honored them with visits. I wondered at this, for the planet was located in a populous section of space and surely such an idyllic world could not escape the attention of parties of pleasure-seekers vacationing from their work-a-day worlds.

If there were ever a planet for vacation, this was it, I thought to myself. Industry seemed neglected here. I saw no factory or machine. A world of water, with a handful of islands scattered on its surface. A population of perhaps not more than a few million in a world of considerable proportion. No dangerous beasts, no disease, no violent weather. It was, I was assured, always warm, always fruitful.

There should have been nothing to spoil my pleasure, yet there was something which seemed to trouble the back of my mind. The natives were friendly enough, still there was a certain reserve in their manner. It was hard to place, one sensed it. These pink people lived so simply and so pleasantly, yet one could see they were not savages. No, far from it. There was a certain way of manner that depicted the civilized man, and their learning, though indolent and indifferent to the problems of the Stellar Federation, was nonetheless able.

My black skin and Nufrikan clothes should have excited their children at

least, for these people had few visitors, yet even there I felt a certain reserve in their approach. Their children showed not the enthusiasm with which I had been greeted by the young of other worlds—filled with romantic ideas of many stars.

The natives were affable, but it slowly penetrated into my consciousness that something was wrong.

I could not place it, yet, after several days I felt slightly ill at ease. Perhaps the first thing was the lack of other visitors. Why was this beautiful planet not a haven of vacationers? It had everything. The wide oceans—shallow, I was told for the most part—in other parts very deep—the green smiling islands—the people and their languid, soft songs. Yet, there was that reserve.

After I had been there a few days I made friends with one Salur, a fair youth of the island on which I stayed. He often would accompany me, seeming to gain a sort of reflected pleasure from my delights in his world.

From him I gained some information, in an indirect way. He professed not to know why others did not visit the planet more often. He admitted partially one supposition that began to be borne in on me—that Aquella was partly a colonial world. I had surmised it from the apparent lack of industry, but Salur said that such was erroneous. He said it had once been a less watery world and that its present state was due to the planning of the Stellar discoverers.

It was, he explained with an enigmatic glint and a turned away face, something of a volcanic world at one time with terrible eruptions and geysers shaking its surface continually. The Stellar Federation had changed that. They had flooded the planet with water, extinguished the agony of the soil, and made it into the paradise it was.

Perhaps they had been planning it for a vacation world, yet somehow it never became one.

I gazed over the silent blue ocean and wondered at the purity of the air and the warmth of the sky. Wide, shallow ocean—it should have been filled with the pleasure craft of a hundred planets. Yet nought but a single red-sailed caravel bobbed along the water.

Salur, too, stared silently and again I wondered at the curious sad look that always seemed to linger in the eyes of his race. There was something that was buried deep in this people's past.

I remembered that he had described Aquella as only partially colonial—then he must mean that his people were actually natives here and not immi-

grants from some other world. At that, I remembered I had seen no pink humanoids elsewhere. Black and brown and red, yes. The vivid blue-skinned people of Algol, and the gold of Sango, and my own shining black. But of pink folk, I knew no possible parent world. They must have always been here and it was racial memory of their terrified past, a past of volcano and lava and quake, that lingered in their minds and saddened them.

I suggested to Salur a voyage to some other island and he lazily nodded. We took a wide and tossing shell-like boat, hoisted the striped sail and drifted slowly away across the azure waters. The island fell behind us and then sank beneath the horizon. We were alone on the empty blue sea.

I gazed down into the depths, but saw nothing. I spoke idly of the curious lack of fishes—a feature that would be remedied only by the passing of more centuries. On this world, which could not have been remade more than a few centuries ago, I know there would be gaps.

Salur stared down into the depths and said nothing. I felt the strange sadness envelop him—sadness and something else. Something that sent a slight chill down my back and then was lost.

Night found us on the water and we lay on our backs and stared into the blue sky watching the myriad stars twinkle. By and by I felt that I must be growing sleepy, for it seemed that the sky grew mistier and the stars faded out into grayness. Then the boat rocked sharply and I sat up.

Salur was sitting up also, gazing out at the sea.

"A rain!" I exclaimed, "and I thought it never rained!"

Salur stared long before he answered.

"Aquilla is not yet perfect. But this is not exactly a rain." His voice was low and tense.

I looked about the empty sea again and now I saw that waves were beating across it and curious trembles were agitating its surface. *A quake*, I thought suddenly, *a quake*. A final struggle of a perhaps not entirely drowned volcano.

The sky was dark and black, not a star shone through. A storm, too, accompanying the quake.

Rapidly it was getting dangerous. I gazed around. Salur sat in the end of the boat staring raptly out into the dark, turbulent sea.

I recovered myself. The ship could not sink, I knew the material it was made of, it could not be battered nor overturned nor sunk. Beneath its simple exterior, the science of the stars kept it firm.

I strapped myself down to the deck and made ready to enjoy the last fury

of the not completely tamed planet. Perhaps this was the answer to the lack of visitors. It was not safe. Perhaps I had missed some stellar beacon before I landed.

Salur seemed to guess my thoughts; for a brief instant he tore his gaze away from the wild darkness and said: "This has not happened in five generations."

A chill struck me again. Why was his voice so tense, so pitched? Why did it seem to be harsher than before? Why were his eyes so strangely aglow?

I was close then, I knew, to the secret that these people held in their hearts. I was close then to the knowledge that set them apart.

Sometimes, in these later years, I wish I had got no closer. Sometimes, I wish the storm had abated.

Rapidly it grew even darker than before. Then came a sudden flash of lightning, and another, after that the thunder, roaring and violent. The ship pitched and tossed as furious waves lashed us and broke over our deck.

There was a rumbling beneath the waters. I felt the grinding vibration. In the boat, Salur, heedless of danger, stood up and faced into the wind. His hair streaming behind him, his eyes glaring. The waters writhed in agony and the thunder roared as the lightning flashed its momentary glimpses of the mad scene.

Then came another terrible jarring. Quake after quake was torturing the ocean floor.

Then Salur gave a great shout and I stared as he pointed. The ocean was broken and in the flare of a lightning bolt I saw a thrust of wet gray rock suddenly pierce the surface like a submarine breaking water. Then all about I saw other surfaces break, and in the terrible roaring noise a great section of land rose for a moment above the sea.

I saw a great wet plain, streaming with rills of black water, streaked with white and green weeds and sea growth. There were great hummocks and boulders covered with slime.

And I saw, against the black storm sky, piercing towers of metal twisted and broken. I saw, lit by the crackle of lightning, great piles of armor plates and hideous webbed metal chains that dangled from spiky wheels. The great black snout of a gun was outlined against the sky—dripping weeds hanging from its end.

All that, I glimpsed in the instant before the land plunged back into the sea. I saw Salur standing in the end of the boat, waving his hands and screaming at the top of his lungs. And I heard the things he screamed. Things that should not be heard by civilized ears.

And I knew then what Aquella was and why it had few visitors.

In the morning, when the storm was but a terrible memory and the sun shone upon a tranquil blue sea, we sailed silently back to the island.

I made my way through the streets of the little town. I knew the pink folk knew that I knew. I saw the light that glimmered in the back of their eyes and I understood the perverted sadness that prevented them from enjoying their beautiful world.

I knew why I had seen no pink-skinned folk on all the worlds of the starry horde.

When I entered my space-yacht to leave this planet forever, I asked Salur a question: "Aquella was not always the name of this world?"

He looked at me and nodded. "Before it was flooded, Aquella was not the name of this world."

I hesitated to confirm my knowledge. But I must. I placed my hand on the door of my ship's lock and said: "The original name of this world, before it was cleansed, was—"

Salur stared at me. "Earth," he finished slowly.

I closed the door.

The Empire of the Necromancers

by Clark Ashton Smith

One of the most colorful etchers of fantastic scenery, a portrayer of exotics of great vividness and depth, Clark Ashton Smith has brooded long on the time-darkened lanes of history. The lost lore of man's million-year-old past leads but to the unfathomable darkness of man's billion-year future. This is a tale from the as-yet-unlit corridors along which man may travel during the endless aeons to come. It is such a tale as only a master dreamer could conjure up.

THE LEGEND of Mmatmuor and Sodosma shall arise only in the latter cycles of Earth, when the glad legends of the prime have been forgotten. Before the time of its telling, many epochs shall have passed away, and the seas shall have fallen in their beds, and new continents shall have come to birth. Perhaps, in that day, it will serve to beguile for a little the black weariness of a dying race, grown hopeless of all but oblivion. I tell the tale as men shall tell it in Zothique, the last continent, beneath a dim sun and sad heavens where the stars come out in terrible brightness before eventide.

I

Mmatmuor and Sodosma were necromancers who came from the dark isle of Naat, to practise their baleful arts in Tinarath, beyond the shrunken seas. But they did not prosper in Tinarath: for death was deemed a holy thing by the people of that gray country; and the nothingness of the tomb was not lightly to be desecrated; and the raising up of the dead by necromancy was held in abomination.

So, after a short interval, Mmatmuor and Sodosma were driven forth by the anger of the inhabitants, and were compelled to flee toward Cincor, a desert of the south, which was peopled only by the bones and mummies of a race that the pestilence had slain in former time.

The land into which they went lay drear and leprous and ashen below the huge, ember-colored sun. Its crumbling rocks and deathly solitudes of sand would have struck terror to the hearts of common men; and, since they had been thrust out in that barren place without food or sustenance, the plight of the sorcerers might well have seemed a desperate one. But, smiling secretly, with the air of conquerors who tread the approaches of a long-coveted realm, Sodosma and Mmatmuor walked steadily on into Cincor.

Unbroken before them, through fields devoid of trees and grass, and across the channels of dried-up rivers, there ran the great highway by which travellers had gone formerly between Cincor and Tinarath. Here they met no living thing; but soon they came to the skeletons of a horse and its rider, lying full in the road, and wearing still the sumptuous harness and raiment which they had worn in the flesh. And Mmatmuor and Sodosma paused before the piteous

bones, on which no shred of corruption remained; and they smiled evilly at each other.

"The steed shall be yours," said Mmatmuor, "since you are a little the elder of us two, and are thus entitled to precedence; and the rider shall serve us both and be the first to acknowledge fealty to us in Cincor."

Then, in the ashy sand by the wayside, they drew a threefold circle; and standing together at its center, they performed the abominable rites that compel the dead to arise from tranquil nothingness and obey henceforward, in all things, the dark will of the necromancer. Afterward they sprinkled a pinch of magic powder on the nostril-holes of the man and the horse; and the white bones, creaking mournfully, rose up from where they had lain and stood in readiness to serve their masters.

So, as had been agreed between them, Sodosma mounted the skeleton steed and took up the jewelled reins, and rode in an evil mockery of Death on his pale horse; while Mmatmuor trudged on beside him, leaning lightly on an ebon staff; and the skeleton of the man, with its rich raiment flapping loosely, followed behind the two like a servitor.

After a while, in the gray waste, they found the remnant of another horse and rider, which the jackals had spared and the sun had dried to the leanness of old mummies. These also they raised up from death; and Mmatmuor bestrode the withered charger; and the two magicians rode on in state, like errant emperors, with a lich and a skeleton to attend them. Other bones and charnel remnants of men and beasts, to which they came anon, were duly resurrected in like fashion; so that they gathered to themselves an ever-swelling train in their progress through Cincor.

Along the way, as they neared Yethlyreom, which had been the capital, they found numerous tombs and necropoli, inviolate still after many ages, and containing swathed mummies that had scarcely withered in death. All these they raised up and called from sepulchral night to do their bidding. Some they commanded to sow and till the desert fields and hoist water from the sunken wells; others they left at diverse tasks, such as the mummies had performed in life. The century-long silence was broken by the noise and tumult of myriad activities; and the lank liches of weavers toiled at their shuttles; and the corpses of plowmen followed their furrows behind carrion oxen.

Weary with their strange journey and their oft-repeated incantations, Mmatmuor and Sodosma saw before them at last, from a desert hill, the lofty spires and fair, unbroken domes of Yethlyreom, steeped in the darkening stagnant blood of ominous sunset.

"It is a goodly land," said Mmatmuor, "and you and I will share it between us, and hold dominion over all its dead, and be crowned as emperors on the morrow in Yethlyreom."

"Aye," replied Sodosma, "for there is none living to dispute us here; and those that we have summoned from the tomb shall move and breathe only at our dictation, and may not rebel against us."

So, in the blood-red twilight that thickened with purple, they entered Yethlyreom and rode on among the lofty, lampless mansions, and installed themselves with their grisly retinue in that stately and abandoned palace, where the dynasty of Nimboth emperors had reigned for two thousand years with dominion over Cincor.

In the dusty golden halls, they lit the empty lamps of onyx by means of their cunning sorcery, and supped on royal viands, provided from past years, which they evoked in like manner. Ancient and imperial wines were poured for them in moonstone cups by the fleshless hands of their servitors; and they drank and feasted and revelled in fantasmagoric pomp, deferring till the morrow the resurrection of those who lay dead in Yethlyreom.

They rose betimes, in the dark crimson dawn, from the opulent palaced-beds in which they had slept; for much remained to be done. Everywhere in that forgotten city, they went busily to and fro, working their spells on the people that had died in the last year of the pest and had lain unburied. And having accomplished this, they passed beyond Yethlyreom into that other city of high tombs and mighty mausoleums, in which lay the Nimboth emperors and the more consequential citizens and nobles of Cincor.

Here they bade their skeleton slaves to break in the sealed doors with hammers; and then, with their sinful, tyrannous incantations, they called forth the imperial mummies, even to the eldest of the dynasty, all of whom came walking stiffly, with lightless eyes, in rich swathings sewn with flame-bright jewels. And also, later, they brought forth to a semblance of life many generations of courtiers and dignitaries.

Moving in solemn pageant, with dark and haughty and hollow faces, the dead emperors and empresses of Cincor made obeisance to Mmatmuor and Sodosma, and attended them like a train of captives through all the streets of Yethlyreom. Afterward, in the immense throne-room of the palace, the necromancers mounted the high double throne, where the rightful rulers had sat with their consorts. Amid the assembled emperors, in gorgeous and funereal state, they were invested with sovereignty by the sere hands of the mummy of Hestayon, earliest of the Nimboth line, who had ruled in half-

mythic years. Then all the descendants of Hestaiyon, crowding the room in a great throng, acclaimed with toneless, echo-like voices the dominion of Mmatmuor and Sodosma.

Thus did the outcast necromancers find for themselves an empire and a subject people in the desolate, barren land where the men of Tinarath had driven them forth to perish. Reigning supreme over all the dead of Cincor, by virtue of their malign magic, they exercised a baleful despotism. Tribute was borne to them by fleshless porters from outlying realms; and plague-eaten corpses, and tall mummies scented with mortuary balsams, went to and fro upon their errands in Yethlyreom, or heaped before their greedy eyes, from inexhaustible vaults, the cobweb-blackened gold and dusty gems of antique time.

Dead laborers made their palace-gardens to bloom with long-perished flowers; liches and skeletons toiled for them in the mines or reared superb, fantastic towers to the dying sun. Chamberlains and princes of old time were their cup-bearers, and stringed instruments were plucked for their delight by the slim hands of empresses with golden hair that had come forth untarnished from the night of the tomb. Those that were fairest, whom the plague and the worm had not ravaged overmuch, they took for their lemans and made to serve their necrophilic lust.

2

In all things, the people of Cincor performed the actions of life at the will of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. They spoke, they moved, they ate and drank as in life. They heard and saw and felt with a similitude of the senses that had been theirs before death; but their brains were enthralled by a dreadful necromancy. They recalled but dimly their former existence; and the state to which they had been summoned was empty and troublous and shadow-like. Their blood ran chill and sluggish, mingled with water of Lethe; and the vapors of Lethe clouded their eyes.

Dumbly they obeyed the dictates of their tyrannous lords, without rebellion or protest, but filled with a vague, illimitable weariness such as the dead must know, when having drunk of eternal sleep, they are called back once more to the bitterness of mortal being. They knew no passion or desire or delight, only the black languor of their awakening from Lethe, and a gray, ceaseless longing to return to that interrupted slumber.

Youngest and last of the Nimboth emperors was Illeiro, who had died in

the first month of the plague, and had lain in his high-built mausoleum for two hundred years before the coming of the necromancers.

Raised up with his people and his fathers to attend the tyrants, Illeiro had resumed the emptiness of existence without question and had felt no surprise. He had accepted his own resurrection and that of his ancestors as one accepts the indignities and marvels of a dream. He knew that he had come back to a faded sun, to a hollow and spectral world, to an order of things in which his place was merely that of an obedient shadow. But at first he was troubled only, like the others, by a dim weariness and a pale hunger for the lost oblivion.

Drugged by the magic of his overlords, weak from the age-long nullity of death, he beheld like a somnambulist the enormities to which his fathers were subjected. Yet, somehow, after many days, a feeble spark awoke in the sodden twilight of his mind.

Like something lost and irretrievable, beyond prodigious gulfs, he recalled the pomp of his reign in Yethlyreom, and the golden pride and exultation that had been his in youth. And recalling it, he felt a vague stirring of revolt, a ghostly resentment against the magicians who had haled him forth to this calamitous mockery of life. Darkly he began to grieve for his fallen state, and the mournful plight of his ancestors and his people.

Day by day, as a cup-bearer in the halls where he had ruled aforetime, Illeiro saw the doings of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. He saw their caprices of cruelty and lust, their growing drunkenness and gluttony. He watched them wallow in their necromantic luxury, and become lax with indolence, gross with indulgence. They neglected the study of their art, they forgot many of their spells. But still they ruled, mighty and formidable; and, lolling on couches of purple and rose, they planned to lead an army of the dead against Tinarath.

Dreaming of conquest, and of vaster necromancies, they grew fat and slothful as worms that have installed themselves in a charnel rich with corruption. And pace by pace with their laxness and tyranny, the fire of rebellion mounted in the shadowy heart of Illeiro, like a flame that struggles with Lethean damps. And slowly, with the waxing of his wrath, there returned to him something of the strength and firmness that had been his in life. Seeing the turpitude of the oppressors, and knowing the wrong that had been done to the helpless dead, he heard in his brain the clamor of stifled voices demanding vengeance.

Among his fathers, through the palace-halls of Yethlyreom, Illeiro moved silently at the bidding of the masters, or stood awaiting their command. He poured in their cups of onyx the amber vintages, brought by wizardry from

hills beneath a younger sun; he submitted to their contumelies and insults. And night by night he watched them nod in their drunkenness, till they fell asleep flushed and gross, amid their arrogated splendor.

There was little speech among the living dead; and son and father, daughter and mother, lover and beloved, went to and fro without sign of recognition, making no comment on their evil lot. But at last, one midnight, when the tyrants lay in slumber, and the flames wavered in the necromantic lamps, Illeiro took counsel with Hestaiyon, his eldest ancestor, who had been famed as a great wizard in fable and was reputed to have known the secret lore of antiquity.

Hestaiyon stood apart from the others, in a corner of the shadowy hall. He was brown and withered in his crumbling mummy-cloths; and his lightless obsidian eyes appeared to gaze still upon nothingness. He seemed not to have heard the questions of Illeiro; but at length, in a dry, rustling whisper, he responded:

"I am old, and the night of the sepulcher was long, and I have forgotten much. Yet, groping backward across the void of death, it may be that I shall retrieve something of my former wisdom; and between us we shall devise a mode of deliverance." And Hestaiyon searched among the shreds of memory, as one who reaches into a place where the worm has been and the hidden archives of old time have rotted in their covers; till at last he remembered, and said:

"I recall that I was once a mighty wizard; and among other things, I knew the spells of necromancy but employed them not, deeming their use and the raising up of the dead an abhorrent act. Also, I possessed other knowledge; and perhaps, among the remnants of that ancient lore, there is something which may serve to guide us now. For I recall a dim, dubitable prophecy, made in the primal years, at the founding of Yethlyreom and the empire of Cincor. The prophecy was, that an evil greater than death would befall the emperors and the people of Cincor in future time; and that the first and the last of the Nimboth dynasty, conferring together, would effect a mode of release and the lifting of the doom. The evil was not named in the prophecy; but it was said that the two emperors would learn the solution of their problem by the breaking of an ancient clay image that guards the nethermost vault below the imperial palace in Yethlyreom."

Then, having heard this prophecy from the faded lips of his forefather, Illeiro mused a while, and said:

"I remember now an afternoon in early youth, when searching idly through the unused vaults of our palace, as a boy might do, I came to the last vault and found therein a dusty, uncouth image of clay, whose form and countenance were strange to me. And, knowing not the prophecy, I turned away in disappointment, and went back as idly as I had come, to seek the moted sunlight."

Then, stealing away from their heedless kinfolk, and carrying jewelled lamps they had taken from the hall, Hestaiyon and Illeiro went downward by subterranean stairs beneath the palace; and threading like implacable furtive shadows the maze of nighted corridors, they came at last to the lowest crypt.

Here, in the black dust and clotted cobwebs of an immemorial past, they found, as had been decreed, the clay image, whose rude features were those of a forgotten earthly god. And Illeiro shattered the image with a fragment of stone; and he and Hestaiyon took from its hollow center a great sword of unrusted steel, and a heavy key of untarnished bronze, and tablets of bright brass on which were inscribed the various things to be done, so that Cincor should be rid of the dark reign of the necromancers and the people should win back to oblivious death.

So, with the key of untarnished bronze, Illeiro unlocked, as the tablets had instructed him to do, a low and narrow door at the end of the nethermost vault, beyond the broken image; and he and Hestaiyon saw, as had been prophesied, the coiling steps of somber stone that led downward to an undiscovered abyss, where the sunken fires of earth still burned. And leaving Illeiro to ward the open door, Hestaiyon took up the sword of unrusted steel in his thin hand, and went back to the hall where the necromancers slept, lying a-sprawl on their couches of rose and purple, with the wan, bloodless dead about them in patient ranks.

Upheld by the ancient prophecy and the lore of the bright tablets, Hestaiyon lifted the great sword and struck off the head of Mmatmuor and the head of Sodosma, each with a single blow. Then, as had been directed, he quartered the remains with mighty strokes. And the necromancers gave up their unclean lives, and lay supine, without movement, adding a deeper red to the rose and a brighter hue to the sad purple of their couches.

Then, to his kin, who stood silent and listless, hardly knowing their liberation, the venerable mummy of Hestaiyon spoke in sere murmurs, but authoritatively, as a king who issues commands to his children. The dead emperors and empresses stirred, like autumn leaves in a sudden wind, and a whisper

passed among them and went forth from the palace, to be communicated at length, by devious ways, to all the dead of Cincor.

All that night, and during the blood-dark day that followed, by wavering torches or the light of the failing sun, an endless army of plague-eaten lichs, of tattered skeletons, poured in a ghastly torrent through the streets of Yethlyreom and along the palace-hall where Hestaiyon stood guard above the slain necromancers. Unpausing, with vague, fixed eyes, they went on like driven shadows to seek the subterranean vaults below the palace, to pass through the open door where Illeiro waited in the last vault, and then to wend downward by a thousand thousand steps to the verge of that gulf in which boiled the ebbing fires of earth. There, from the verge, they flung themselves to a second death and the clean annihilation of the bottomless flames.

But, after all had gone to their release, Hestaiyon still remained alone in the fading sunset, beside the cloven corpses of Mmatmuor and Sodosma. There, as the tablets had directed him to do, he made trial of those spells of elder necromancy which he had known in his former wisdom, and cursed the dismembered bodies with that perpetual life-in-death which Mmatmuor and Sodosma had sought to inflict upon the people of Cincor. And maledictions came from the pale lips, and the heads rolled horribly with glaring eyes, and the limbs and torsos writhed on their imperial couches amid clotted blood. Then, with no backward look, knowing that all was done as had been ordained and predicted from the first, the mummy of Hestaiyon left the necromancers to their doom, and went wearily through the nighted labyrinth of vaults to rejoin Illeiro.

So, in tranquil silence, with no further need of words, Illeiro and Hestaiyon passed through the open door of the nether vault, and Illeiro locked the door behind them with its key of untarnished bronze. And thence, by the coiling stairs, they wended their way to the verge of the sunken flames and were one with their kinsfolk and their people in the last, ultimate nothingness.

But of Mmatmuor and Sodosma, men say that their quartered bodies crawl to and fro to this day in Yethlyreom, finding no peace or respite from their doom of life-in-death, and seeking vainly through the black maze of nether vaults the door that was locked by Illeiro.

When Old Gods Wake

by A. Merritt

The Avon Book Company has reprinted at popular prices all of the novels of the late Abraham Merritt. Doing so, it acquired the enthusiastic support of a surprisingly large section of the reading public. Just about everybody, we found, likes Merritt. But Merritt's output was not unlimited and the list of his books and stories proved all too short. Then, when it became known after his death that he had left, among his papers, manuscripts of three or four unfinished works, the Avon Fantasy Reader began to receive requests from readers for us to publish these fragments. We hesitated to do so because they were unfortunately just that—fragments. Now, at insistent reader demand, we are venturing to print for the first time anywhere one of these short literary efforts. The reader is reminded that When Old Gods Wake is not a short story, not a novelette, not anything but the unfinished first chapter of what might have been a 60,000 word sequel to his novel The Snake Mother. We present it as a service to the readers and friends of A. Merritt.



Chapter I. Altar of Kukulkan

THE SILENCE SEEMED to be focussed within the temple; to have its heart there; a heart that did not need to beat, since all the silence was alive. Outside the heat of the Yucatan mid-day held the ruins in breathless grip.

Barry Manson, crouching at the base of the ancient altar, thought: *the silence . . . marched . . . marched into the temple. The shrieks of the parrots were cut off first . . . then the little blue and yellow birds stopped quarreling in the crimson fruited tree at the base of the shattered stairway . . . and then the silence marched up the stairway and into this chamber and crowded against the seaward side . . . and that shut out the swish of the waves.*

He looked at Joan. She sat a few paces away, her back against the massive pedestal of a broken pillar. Her hands were clasped around her knees. Her

eyes were intent upon the wall behind the altar. A painting once had covered that wall. The fingers of time, working patiently through the centuries, had plucked away most of the stucco that had carried it. But above the altar, as though protected by its shadow, a large and irregular fragment remained. Upon it, colors still vivid, were the head and shoulders of Kukulkan, God of the Air of the ancient Mayans—and much more than that. The Feathered Serpent, his symbol and his avatar, floated over him, fanged jaws agape, plumed wings spread wide. The face of Kukulkan was the conventionalized one of the New Empire; the nose grotesquely lengthened like that of a tapir, lips thick and protruding, prognathous-jawed, bat-eared; the ears ringed and the labret through the nostrils; head plumed with the sacred *panacho*.

The painted gaze of the god seemed fixed as intently upon the girl as hers upon him.

The pedestal against which Joan leaned was covered with carved figures of priests of Kukulkan who had served him when ruined Tuloom had been one of the great cities of the Mayans, and this its holiest temple. On these figures the colors were also bright. Into them Joan's copper hair melted, merged with their reds and ochres so that for an instant Barry had the illusion that her face was all of her.

A disembodied face peering out of the stone and holding communion with the god like a summoned priestess.

Impatiently Barry arose and walked over to her. She did not look up. She whispered, eyes still absorbed by the painted god:

"Don't break the silence, Barry! It's like the silence that wraps the City of Jade . . . where the thousand sages of T'zan T'zao sit holding fast to the thought that created the world . . . and that the ghost of a ghost of a sound would destroy . . . and with it the world . . ."

He felt increase of revolt against the fantasies gathering about him. He shook his shoulders and laughed. He said, loudly:

"The silence is broken, Joan—and the world still spins."

It was true. The silence was broken. It was retreating from the chamber, slowly . . . marching away as it had marched in. Faintly came the swish of the waves, growing ever stronger. The silence was marching out of the chamber toward the shattered stairway up which it had come. Joan arose, slowly . . . it was odd, Barry thought, how every movement of hers in rising kept to the rhythm, kept to the beat, of the unseen and unheard feet of the retreating silence.

The silence marched down the stairway. He heard again the quarreling of the little blue and yellow birds . . . then the shrieks of the parrots . . .

Joan said, unsteadily: "It was time you did that, Barry. It was . . . doing things to me. *Look, Barry—look . . .!*"

He followed her finger, pointing to the painted face of Kukulcan. For a breath he saw it . . . another face looking out from the wall.

An ageless face . . . the nose long and curved and delicate. The lips full but sharply cut, archaically sensuous . . . hair as red as his own and eyes as blue as Joan's. A face as devoid of human equivalence as it was timeless . . . yet human . . . as though the seed from which it had sprung into godhood had been human. Incalculable, unreadable . . . but still within it something that could be read up to that point where the humanness of it merged into the god . . . might be read more plainly if the god would within it merge more fully into the humanness. Nothing of benevolence in it . . . but neither was there shade of malevolence, cruelty . . . humanless, in human mask.

Barry thought: *it is like that mountain peak in the City of Jade of which Joan spoke . . . the peak shaped like the head of a man and all of clearest crystal to which the thoughts of men are drawn . . . all their thoughts . . . and pass from its eyes and mouth cleansed of falsehood and of error, prejudice and hatred and love . . . standing naked and stark before T'zan T'zao to be judged . . .*

Power was in the face, immense power . . . and something of wildness, of freedom . . . the freedom of primeval things . . . like the wind, the waves, the sun . . .

And then the face was gone. Upon the wall was the tapir snout of Kukulcan, the protruding lips, the fanged and feathered serpent.

His hand was clenching Joan's wrist. She whispered:

"You saw it! You're hurting me!"

He dropped her wrist. He said: "It is another painting beneath this one. An older painting. Some trick of the light brought it out."

She said, doubtful: "Maybe. But I think it was Kukulcan as the first Mayans knew him. Kukulcan who came to them from still an older race. Kukulcan when he was worshipped with flowers and fruits and incense and prayer. Before his worship was debased and the cruel human sacrifices began. That was when and why he turned from the Mayans. And so their doom came swiftly upon them. For it was never he who came to them thereafter, Barry. It was an evil god hiding behind his mask and name—"

She hesitated, seemed listening: "But yes—he did come. Came even to the

Aztecs, who steeped his rites in even greater cruelties and renamed him Quetzalcoatl . . . came again and again to thwart that other god when his evil grew too strong . . . the Lord of Darkness, the Lord of the Dead . . ."

Her voice died; she stood with eyes rapt, face colorless, bent as though listening. He took her by the shoulders, shook her:

"Snap out of it, Joan. What's the matter with you? You're talking nonsense."

"Am I, Barry? It was what Kukulkan was telling me."

She dropped her head on his shoulder; clung to him, trembling. His hands slipped from her shoulders, drew her to him. He said huskily:

"Coming any closer to loving me, Joan?"

She raised her eyes to his, frankly, yet with something of regret lurking in them.

"Sorry, Barry dear. But it's still the same. I—"

He interrupted her, speaking monotonously: "Like you better than any other man I know, except Bill, of course, and I wish I could love you the way you want, but—yes, Joan, I know all that by heart now."

She flushed and said: "That's not fair. After all, Bill's my brother and why shouldn't I love him? And I do *like* you better than anyone else. So much so that at times—" she stopped; he repeated eagerly:

"That at times?"

"Never mind. Barry, why do you want *me*? There are plenty of nice girls who like just the things you do. I know a dozen who would love you—and any one of them would make you a perfect wife. I *don't* like the things you do. Or if I do, to me they're only brief amusements. Why, I'd rather help Bill dig up a cup from some ruin that spans the gap of knowledge between its maker and us than win a thousand sporting trophies."

He said: "If you loved me that wouldn't make any difference."

She shook her head: "We've been brought up differently, Barry—and we're both too set in our ways to change. I am anyway . . ." Suddenly she laughed: "And you haven't fooled me by this trip, Barry Manson. I know damned well that it wasn't any abrupt interest in the Mayans that prompted it. I'm mighty grateful to you for giving Bill the chance he's always wanted. But I wouldn't marry you out of gratitude, and I don't think you'd want me to—would you, Barry?"

His gray eyes narrowed; he said, brutally: "Listen, redhead. You don't fool me any either. It's damned little of highbrow or blue-stockings you'd be if you fell in love with a man. Nature didn't build you that way. And it would

be damned little you'd be thinking of fossils if that happened. You'd be too busy having babies."

She said, coldly: "I think that's rather—beastly!"

He said, hotly: "Is that so? What's beastly about babies? You'd be getting a slant on the present day with some outlook on the future—instead of burying your red head in the past. What I'm afraid of is that you'll marry some dusty-dry, mummy-minded, scientific grave robber and spend the rest of your life nursing fossils instead of what you are obviously designed for—"

She interrupted, furiously, eyes snapping blue sparks: "I'll let nobody pick my husband! Least of all—you!"

"Won't you!" Barry's too-quick anger flared. "It seems to me you were ready enough to pick wives for me just now. Not one, but a dozen—" He gripped her arms and swung her to him. "You—the highbrow scientist? Like hell you are! Look at that mop of red hair. Those eyes of yours with the devil's twist to the ends of them, that mouth of yours—and I've seen you in your rag of a bathing suit! I tell you again, by God, that once you're awake it's not fossils you'll be thinking of! And maybe this will help wake you—"

He held her close, kissed eyes and throat, pressed his lips to hers. She lay in his arms, passive, unresisting. She said at last, indifferently:

"Cave-man stuff, Barry. Too crude. It doesn't interest me at all."

He released her, stepping back as though out of a dash of cold water. She raised her arms and began to coil her disordered hair. She laughed at him, a little too sweetly—though he did not know it.

"You see, Barry dear, we're as far apart as the poles. You make love to me by enumerating my—ah, charms, is the *cliche* for it, I think. You are an—ah, anatomical lover. It is a viewpoint, certainly. A Sultan's viewpoint, but I do not care for Sultans. Nor," went on Joan, still far too sweetly and reasonably, "do I think that my worthinesses are *wholly* anatomical. But then—you've always been rich—"

* * *

EDITOR'S NOTE: At the above point, the manuscript comes to an abrupt end. We corresponded with Mrs. Eleanor H. Merritt, the author's widow, in an effort to find out if there was any light to be shed on the remainder of the novel. Mrs. Merritt wrote:

"Mr. Merritt's fans had been devilling him to write a sequel to The Snake Mother or The Face in the Abyss—so he started out with that thought in

mind, describing the place in Old Yucatan where the Mayan carvings were seen. The second carving that came visible or was shown to Barry was to be the link that would carry him through the novel, because he would discover the red-headed picture underneath the surface picture to be his own replica in another incarnation.

"The ancient carving would cast a spell over Barry that would take him back to the time when his ancestors were in the same environment as the carving's creation; there he would encounter also the earlier incarnation of the girl.

"The novel was laid to one side while Mr. Merritt figured out a few of the problems that Barry would be up against when he came in contact with his ancestors of the red-haired race. It was also laid aside because Mr. Merritt had a hard time even bringing himself to think of writing a sequel to any of his stories. While he would be figuring out ways and means of getting his characters around, another story-idea that was entirely new would pop into his mind and he would not be able to resist the temptation to try out the new one. Then again he had so little leisure time for novel writing in the last few years."

The Were-Snake

by Frank Belknap Long, Jr.

Frank Belknap Long, Jr., may be new to the Avon Fantasy Reader but he is not new to the pages of fantastic periodicals. One of the pillars of modern science-fiction production, Long has a myriad of good stories to his credit. The Were-Snake is one of his earliest tales, a story of ancient ruins and of age-old evils still lingering amid the relics of past horror. It is one of those first few stories whose acclaim convinced the writer that he should turn his talents permanently to the storytelling art.

W

HAT A perfectly adorable ruin," said Miss Beardsley. "I love deepest gloom, and this place is as mournful as Erebus! The perversity of nature has entered into the rocks; they seem alive!"

"These people worshipped a curious pantheon," I explained. "Ishtar was represented here. Hellish rites were performed on the altar before you. The modern mind cannot conceive them, and to describe them would require the invention of a new language. These piles are older than Stonehenge or Egypt. They antedate the pyramids by thousands of years, and probably go back to the neolithic age."

"Who was Ishtar?" asked Miss Beardsley.

"The great mother goddess, the *magna mater* of the Babylonians, the Assyrians and darker, more sinister peoples whose civilizations were legends in the age of Homer. The worship of Ishtar, variously called Innanna, Nina, Astarte, extended over the whole of Asia; and her altars are to be found in Persia, India, China, Arabia and Siberia. . . . Ishtar's earthly counterpart was a woman of devastating beauty, who possessed the cruel and vicious nature of the Roman empress Messalina. In Nineveh, in Tyre, in Erech her terrestrial manifestations lured camel-drivers in from the desert, and destroyed them with kisses. It has been estimated that her victims in a single year outnumbered armies of locusts!"

Miss Beardsley scowled and poked with her parasol among gray, antiquated stones. "It isn't that I don't trust you. But they told me in the village that native girls walk here at night and pretend to be reincarnations of that goddess."

"The native girls are very ugly," I assured her. "They have flat noses and square ears and they wear rings through their lips. No white man could love them."

"I never liked them," murmured Miss Beardsley.

I took Miss Beardsley's hand and smiled into her nervous blue eyes. I found her anger more delightful than the impecunious glory of archeology, but like most stubborn men I invariably sought excuses. "There is no truth in those silly old tales," I said, "But it *is* something to sleep here. The place is haunted and it will give me prestige."

"But what has superstition to do with archeology?" demanded Miss Beardsley.

"We must investigate all superstitions," I responded. "They often furnish us with invaluable data. Lord Clayton-Maddox ignores haunted ruins, and the Royal Society ignores Clayton-Maddox."

"What of it?" pouted Miss Beardsley. I felt that her frivolity did not become her.

"I fear," I said, "that you underestimate the satisfaction of achievement and the value of rewards!"

Miss Beardsley made a gesture indicating contempt. "But they are both quite worthless," she snapped. "In fifty years you will no longer desire them!" She stooped, and picked up a handful of grayish sand. "You will be less than that!" she said.

My guide's eyes sparkled, and he smiled at Miss Beardsley. "It is encouraging," he said, "to hear a woman talk like that. We of the East place less value upon externals. We educate the *soul* and we do not value rewards. With us it is a distinction to remain humble and unknown. We rather despise those who are rich in the world's goods."

"And what is the purpose of such a ridiculous attitude?" I asked.

There was a hint of reluctance in his voice when he answered me. "You Saxons are primitive and uncivilized. You amuse yourselves with absurd toys; you are proud of your bridges and your automobiles, your telephones, and fireless cookers, and your vile, vicious factories; but we seek true culture and understanding. Your culture decayed before the invention of printing. Your middle ages were glorious. You had then great cathedrals, sacred and profane mysteries, magic and holy symbols. You had one great seer who surpassed the ancient East in wisdom. John Dee knew the secrets and terrors that lurk in lonely souls, and had you followed Dee instead of such children as Newton and Watt you might now be in direct communication with the unknown. The true culture of Greece vanished when the philosophers entered Athens; your civilization took the wrong path and perished with the Italian renaissance. You ask me why we educate the soul. We educate the soul to make it strong. When the soul is strong it is able to conquer—but there are things which I can not name!"

"Fiddlesticks!" I retorted. "But tell me, do any nameless things haunt these ruins?"

My guide looked at me evasively and avoided a direct reply. "You will need a knife, Heaven-born!" he informed me.

"And a gun?" I queried.

"It does no good to shoot when you see the eyes. They are invulnerable. But a knife you might find useful."

"A gun should be sufficient," I insisted. "And I do not think that I shall take a knife!"

"You must take a knife, too," said Miss Beardsley. "And if the native girls—." Her eyes hardened, and I saw that there were possibilities and depths in her which I had not suspected.

2

That night I camped in the gray and ominously deserted temple of Ishtar. It wasn't pleasant. The wind swept in from the desert and whistled eerily about lonely altars and dark amorphous piles. Locusts alighted upon my nose and ears; and they made molasses upon my beard and refused to disembark. Nothing is more repulsive to me than insects, and yet it was no good being angry with them. I sat and dozed, or stared drowsily into the darkness, and thought of the charnel worms which the mad Arab Alhazred bred in the bellies of slain camels. I wondered if I should have the moral courage to face the apparition when it came. It would be necessary to challenge and expose it.

What impressed me above all things was the survival of the Ishtar legend among the natives. I recalled the horrible rites connected with her worship, and curiously enough, I could not rid my mind of a vague longing to sit enraptured at the spectacle of a living sacrifice to the Assyrian pantheon on the dark, ageless altar before me. Like an idiot, I imagined one. The sacrifice took the most loathsome form. The victim was fastened to the gray stone altar by six hooded priests of Ishtar and hacked to pieces with little knives. And while the horrid priests wrought their unhallowed butchery Ishtar smiled, and standing at the base of the altar comforted the victim by stroking his hair.

And yet in spite of Ishtar's cruelty the Babylonians and Assyrians had worshipped her with a curious devotion. Ishtar, I had been told, was so beautiful that no man could look upon her unveiled face and retain the sight of his eyes. Her hair was bronzed, like the sands of the desert near an oasis, and her lips placed the beholder in immediate danger. Men forgot their wives, and sometimes even their merchandise and camels, and fell down and worshipped. All day over the smooth sands processions of men crawled toward her on their hands and knees. Imperial edicts had been levied against her; but men risked death and exile and crawled toward her on their hands and knees. She was more beautiful than the dawn when it comes up all white and purple

and fragrant with the odors of paradise. There was something in her movements, in the way in which she held her head, in the curve of her elbow or in the glimmer of light on her tapering ankles that sent a bright, impossible joy into the hearts of her devotees; and no man who had once beheld Ishtar could be satisfied for long with an ordinary woman.

I awoke from a dream of Ishtar and incredible, antique dawns and stared into a darkness that shamed the stars. Only in the desert does the darkness thicken, like whipped cream, and stream past with an audible whisper.

The darkness was like a great black beetle covering the world with its wings. No shadows moved in it and no one breathed in it, but the dark itself was alive, and it *whispered*. The night was like an old woman that had given birth to the darkness. Up beyond the darkness sat the mother of the darkness, with her changeling upon her knees. And then in that desolate wilderness of smothering black I saw two luminous green eyes that stared and did not blink.

I got nervously to my feet and told the eyes that I didn't care. The sound of my own voice reassured me. "You are not really the eyes of Ishtar!" I said. "This is some trick—some ridiculous, shameful trick! You take advantage of Americans. But I shall inform the consul. We are not to be trifled with. Our consul has red hair, and he beats his wife and he judges men by the color of their skin. He will not even complain to our government. He will take a delightfully unconventional view of the affair. He has a nervous dislike for imposters. He will fasten you to a post, and pull out your teeth, and tickle you upon the soles of your feet until you scream, and gibber, and a nameless horror fastens upon your brain."

The eyes did not even blink. The eyes were green coals in a whispering void. They stared lidlessly in the dark and I thought: "These are surely the eyes of Ishtar!"

An extraordinary numbness passed over me. It seemed to me then that nothing mattered; and my excitement gradually gave way to a stoical indifference. And yet in the back of my mind there lurked godless horror, and my heart beat with tragic unsteadiness. The eyes were a seal of the unspeakable horror of the night. They confirmed my hatred of the dark, made the dark more mephitic, more vividly malevolent. The eyes emitted two greenish rays, which traversed the dark but did not illumine it.

I walked forward toward the eyes, holding out my arms to preserve my

balance. Twice I nearly stumbled, and a sharp stone pricked through the thin soles of my moccasins.

The ground was littered with incredibly ancient rocks; and the sand was soft and wet, and it gave beneath me. For a moment I imagined that from somewhere beyond the narrow gray confines of the temple there came a current of sickly, evil-smelling air blowing noiselessly in the dark. I felt the unwholesome warmth upon my cheeks and throat. But worst of all was a sense of evil that enveloped me like a putrid shroud.

I resolved to anticipate the embrace of Ishtar, and I deliberately stared into the eyes before me. They blazed with unconcealed fury. My body sought to rebel and the palms of my hands grew damp with the fear of Ishtar; but my will kept me from the brink of the pit. I thought: "It is very queer that Ishtar does not challenge me. It is very strange that she does nothing but stare with her large soulless eyes." Then I became dumb. I saw that the eyes before me were divided into tiny sections, and the idea came to me that Ishtar's eyes were complex, like the eyes of a fly, and consisted of a million million blazing orbs. The eyes before me were not human!

I retreated until my back was against a high, jutting wall. I ran my hands rapidly back and forth across the stone to assure myself that the wall was high and firm. The wall was a protection against the evil changeling of the night. It was a buttress of the visibly strong and real against the shadowy and amorphous. I quietly drew my revolver from its holster and leveled it at the glaring, unblinking green eyes. My revolver could wreck the darkness, cleave it in two, tear it to shreds. My revolver was a symbol of power brought to bear upon evil that sulked, that stabbed in the back.

I sought to orient myself to the unaccustomed weapon. The thought of the sudden, brutal bark of a revolver in that shrouded place seemed a desecration, and my fingers trembled upon the breech. A queer paralysis held me; for a moment I felt like a corpse standing in a shroud. I was tortured by the fear of noise and action, of anything that would unsettle the darkness and make the situation drastic. For a moment I wavered, and turned over in my mind the advisability of going on my knees to Ishtar and asking her pardon; and then suddenly courage swelled within me like a wave.

I dared to press upon the trigger; and the loathsome blackness disappeared in a plethoric glare which swallowed the earth. Nothing existed but an evanescent and transcendent whiteness; and the darkness quivered like jelly and fell away and writhed on the knees of the night. And then from the matrix

of the glare came a thunderous report, and sound took the place of light, and the darkness came rushing back. I shut my eyes, and cried out. My knees threatened to give way beneath me. But I thought: "One shot is not enough. I must take care to see that Ishtar does not escape."

I discovered that I had no desire to see Ishtar. With my back against the wall and my revolver throttling the darkness I rejoiced that I could not see—I know not what! But I discerned in the momentary glare low, crumbling walls, and leaning altars, and black, satyrlike faces carved in black basalt, and I was filled with horror and awe inexpressible, and I thought that Miss Beardsley had concealed strange realization beneath her flippancy. She had tried to warn me: "This place is as mournful as Erebus. The perversity of nature has entered into the rocks; they seem alive."

The whole business looked ugly, and it especially explained the villagers' fear of the temple of Ishtar. There was dead silence for five minutes or more, and then I threw aside the thing of flame that had failed to justify its boast of strength. I heard a metallic ring as it went clattering over the stones. The eyes of Ishtar had moved nearer; and I felt that I had sounded the depths of anguish, and that I now dangled above an unreverberate abyss. Far above me through a fissure I saw the stars, but they glittered so weakly that they seemed to exude darkness and not light.

What if I should go on my knees to Ishtar and entreat her to love me? Perhaps her eyes would grow soft; perhaps I should see her and find her beautiful. The camel-drivers had found her beautiful. They had come in from the desert and she had comforted them with kisses and killed them with love.

"I could love you!" I said to the eyes, and I loathed the sound of my own voice. I knew what I had done, but I should never have spoken to Ishtar had not some force superior to my will persuaded me that utter destruction is more desirable than suspense.

At once the eyes grew immense and soft and tender in the night. They lost their snakelike glitter. They advanced toward me, and I heard a low swishing sound, as if something smooth and soft were crawling on its hands and knees over a rough, uneven surface. A curiously indescribable odor, acrid and necrophilic, came to me on the tiny breath of air blowing noiselessly in the dark. And then from beyond the narrow, gray borders of the temple I heard a sudden, sharp exclamation of fear and pain.

It was a voice of pity and terror in the night, shaming the eyes of Ishtar. It arose from the dark spaces, tender and full of infinite compassion and infinite fear, and it softened the hard edges of the darkness.

"Stay back," I shouted. "I shall take care of this."

The voice rose to a higher pitch; it swelled in the darkness and formed phrases and sentences and pleaded and reproached.

"Oh, Arthur, I warned you! I told you that nothing good would come of sleeping here. Arthur, where are you?"

"Miss Beardsley," I cried, "you must go back. It is nothing. No hurt will come to you."

"It *is* something, Arthur, and I would face it with you. I have no fear, Arthur. There is nothing in the darkness that can hurt us. Only our fears hurt us, and make monsters of the darkness. You must banish fear, Arthur—and I will help you!"

I knew that Miss Beardsley had rounded the gray-walls, and that she walked within the temple, directly beneath the lowering, menacing eyes of Ishtar. I saw the eyes narrow and their softness disappear and a cold fury flame in their pupilless depths.

"Arthur!" called Miss Beardsley, and I knew that she stood not three yards from me. I could have stepped forward and touched her in the darkness. "Arthur!" The voice was reproachful and despairing.

I moved forward to intercept her, and I saw the eyes drop and swerve to one side. They struck against something soft, and I heard a sudden, frightened scream; and I knew that Miss Beardsley had been attacked, and thrown forcefully upon the ground.

I left the protection of the wall and went down on my hands and knees, groping among gray, cutting stones. Surely, I thought, there must be some way of breaking through, of tearing the darkness apart and rescuing Miss Beardsley.

I shivered and moaned and struggled with the darkness, and the most awful terror filled my mind. I pulled myself forward over the sharp stones until my body became one great sore, and my clothes hung in rags and my eyes filled with tears. For it was all dark and indistinct ahead, and I could not reach Miss Beardsley.

Low, choking gasps came from Miss Beardsley, followed by sobs and guggles, and I heard a thrashing and a retching. "This is lethal horror!" I thought. One solitary, tremendous purpose acted like a tonic upon my will. Ishtar was the horror in the night, and I must save Miss Beardsley from her dark, loathsome paws!

I recognized the menace of Ishtar with a new acuteness. The unearthly evil of Ishtar would imperil the soul of Miss Beardsley, for the goddess would

not be satisfied with a mere body, an empty husk. I was fighting, then, to save both the body and soul of Miss Beardsley. I struggled forward, trying to murder the dark with my two hands. I suffered pain. In the darkness, in the night, I knew a great hurt. And Miss Beardsley was crying and moaning three yards from me.

It seemed frightful to me, my inability to reach Miss Beardsley. I had climbed and climbed over rough, gray stones, and my hands and knees were covered with blood, but I could not reach Miss Beardsley. She retreated from me. Something was carrying her off, dragging her ruthlessly over the stones.

Suddenly my hands and knees went wet. My thoughts became confused, but I knew that I knelt in something wet. It seemed as if I had passed from agony into dumb, unreasoning delirium. I raised one hand slowly out of the wet. I did not confess my fears to myself; I did not openly acknowledge them. Things remained blurred and indefinite in my mind. But in the back of my brain the fear lurked like a panther about to spring.

I raised the hand slowly. I understood dimly that I could not live if the wet confirmed my fear. But it was not blood. It wasn't. Blood was less thick, less cold.

I knew that I knelt in dark slime of the earth. A godless slug that had never seen the sun and moon and stars might leave such slime. I shut my eyes, without precisely knowing why, and my brain became quite quiet. I would go on and on, and find Miss Beardsley!

I crawled forward on my hands and knees over the dark earth. It seemed as if I was going on forever, and yet I knew intuitively that I should eventually find light—and Miss Beardsley. Something that left dark, evil-smelling slime in its wake and that had eyes like the eyes of Ishtar was carrying Miss Beardsley away over the dark. And I would discover its retreat and destroy it utterly. My heart beat wildly, and a buzzing commenced in my brain, but I ground my teeth together, and went on and on.

I followed a trail of foul-smelling slime, and my whole body ached. Formless shapes branched and grew in my mind. I thought aloud: "Will there be no end? Is there no dawn? Will dawn never come up over the desert, all white and clean and radiant? Is there nothing but formless dark that conceals a blasphemous slug that is not human, that leaves slime in its path?"

For the first time I had found voice! I decided to try again, and I pierced the dark with the sharp insistence of my voice. I sought an answer; I sought assurance. There was a sort of malicious cruelty in the silence, and I sought

to lessen the torture, to ease the tension as I crawled forward on my hands and knees.

"Miss Beardsley, you must have faith. I am coming for you on my hands and knees. The way is long, and there will be much pain—but you must fight Ishtar through your will!"

"Arthur, it is squeezing me. It is soft, and I cannot grip it. It slips away from me. You must hurry! But I shall not fear, Arthur. Fear is deadly, and will destroy us both."

Long and white and smooth was the passage that opened out before me, and ran down into the earth. Into my mind came fragments of horrid superstition, and malicious memory, and a phrase from Joseph Glanvill which Poe had once quoted: "the vastness, profundity, and unsearchableness of His works, which have a depth in them greater than the well of Democritus!"

The passage before me was a tunnel of nightmare, and with my brain I doubted; but I saw the tunnel clearly, and the light streaming out of it.

And the thing that had carried Miss Beardsley over the rough ground, the thing of slime and night, had crept into the tunnel, and it did not expect me to follow. Or did it expect me to follow?

Through interminable windings and turnings I clambered on my hands and knees. The tunnel narrowed and threatened to embrace me, and then it widened until I could not glimpse in the wavering light its high, sloping top. Forward I pressed through the shadows, and shouted and wept in the darkness; and far ahead I heard an audible swishing, as the thing crawled through the damp cold, leaving a trail of slime and unspeakable odor in its wake.

The impressions left me by that horrible descent were profoundly grave and unforgettable. But some destiny over which I had no control had arranged that I should suffer, and as I crawled downward on my hands and knees I knew that no bestial god could survive that destiny. Suffering and terror would be mine, but out of the night would come a marvelous dawn, and the confused discords about me would somehow harmonize one with the other, and I should listen with exaltation and ecstasy to a gorgeous and stupendous symphony. I would return from the brink of the pit, and Miss Beardsley and I would face the new dawn together. Why is a cold, ill-lighted tunnel that twists and turns superior to the darkness? Why did I feel a resurgence of confidence as I moved forward over the cold ground?

For eternities I crawled forward on my hands and knees, and then, quite unexpectedly, upon turning a bend I *saw* it. Stupendous and awful! And to think that one might anywhere, unexpectedly, come upon such an abomination. "What is the use of going on?" I thought. "This thing cannot be. If it

exists there is no longer any reason for living—if it exists we are all hopeless, helpless, wretched creatures living in an hallucination, living on the edge of an abyss, living in a dream from which it is death to awake. We live surrounded by a Walpurgis night of obscene shapes; flapping harpies that would tear out our brains and glut upon our bodies in sleep; ghoulish, black-lipped incubi; serpents of nightmare from Acheron; Calibans from Tartarus; we live surrounded by famine and pestilence and death—if such as this can exist under the stars!”

I gnawed at the ends of my fingers to keep from shrieking. Miss Beardsley lay in a pool of ooze, the muscles of her face relaxed; and an awful, indescribable agony shone in her eyes. Her arms hung limp at her sides, but the fingers of her right hand opened and closed convulsively. Above her in the dim light, its face in profile against the dark, ageless, boulder, crouched the thing that I had followed through the darkness, the shadowy, lethal thing of unutterable evil that had left a dark, noisome trail of slime behind it.

Its doglike head was covered with scales, and a long, reptilian tongue protruded from between its black, bulbous lips. Its eye in profile seemed large and gray; but the tunnel-light had glazed it, and it no longer glittered. It was quite hopeless from a sane or human point of view, and when I raised my arm in a gesture of despair and fury it hissed, and spat at me. I knew that I should shiver and grow frigid at its touch. For a moment I did not think that I could ever move again; and I wondered if Miss Beardsley suffered pain. I longed to soothe and console her, to assure her that I understood.

“I shall attend to this!” I said, but I had no intention of attending to anything. My mind ran in one narrow channel, to the exclusion of everything that should have concerned me. “If it does not move, I am safe,” I thought. I stood very still, fearing that if I moved an inch I should bring it down upon me. In fancy I felt its cold nostril nuzzling my face. I knew that it would nuzzle me and nuzzle me until I perished of horror and loathing. I was more upset than I cared to acknowledge. I suppose I thought of Miss Beardsley; but one thing comes back now, and shames me—my vile, shocking cowardice.

But something destroyed my shivering inhibition of muscle and will, and sent me forward like a released spring. *I saw its body!* The head had held me back, and tied my muscles into knots and filled me with shameless fright; but the body called for quick, decisive action. I went forward instantly, and did what I had to do. But before I joined with it in that foggy earth-crypt I bent with amazing agility, and picked from the ground a thin, sharp stone.

I remember severing with one stroke the great, doglike head, and I remember how the black arterial blood ran out of the neck and spattered over my

arms and legs. I know that the body twisted and writhed in the cavern gloom, and tied itself into knots, and monstrous, fleshy folds.

I can see it now, writhing and twisting in the shadows; and I see the severed head lying beside Miss Beardsley on the ground. The jaws open and close; and the eyes are amazed, almost indignant, like the eyes of a child who has been punished for what it does not consider a wrong.

When I had finished, and the folds lay still, I got up and walked over to where Miss Beardsley lay upon the cold, hard ground. I realized that sympathy and pity would never do. Miss Beardsley needed more drastic medicine.

"Get up!" I shouted at her. "I don't intend to stand here and wait for you. Get up!"

Miss Beardsley moaned, and her lips quivered; but a pink tinge crept back into her cheeks.

"Get up at once!" I shouted.

A moment more and she was on her feet, her blue eyes flashing with anger, and a red blush covering her throat and cheeks. I knew then that she was saved, and I drew her quickly toward me, and away from the headless thing on the ground.

"We'll be in time for breakfast," I told her. "I have ordered ostrich eggs and pomegranates. We shall sit on the terrace and watch the dawn come up over the desert!"

"Oh, but my aunt never rises so early," said Miss Beardsley.

"For once," I responded, "we shall do without a chaperon."

I led her out into the cool night. For a moment we stood under the gray wall of the temple of Ishtar, and then we walked arm in arm, toward the hotel. "You are worth a dozen Ishtars," I told her.

"That is not very complimentary," she said. "To tell me that I am only worth—"

In a moment my arms were about her, and I knew the sweet magic of her yielding body.

3

At noon my guide came to me. "You will never guess what we found in the ruin," he said.

"A snake?" I asked.

His face became horribly solemn. "Yes, and no! We found a headless woman! But that is not all. The gray sacrificial stone was covered with blood; and upon it lay the head of a snake—a hooded cobra!"

Miss Beardsley shivered, and plucked at my sleeve: "In the village they tell queer tales. They say—they say that *you* killed Ishtar!"

My guide's small eyes narrowed. "Yes," he said. "And we are grateful. Your courage has delivered us from Ishtar—the were-snake!"

Below the balcony our camels eyed us with tolerant, disillusioned eyes.

The Gun

by Frank Gruber

Frank Gruber is the well known author of many outstanding mystery novels such as The French Key Mystery, Simon Lash, and other best-sellers. In the course of his career he may have written many dozens of detective and western stories, but he has written only two weird yarns which, in his own words, "represent my complete and total contribution to the art of scaring the hell out of people." A regular reader of the Avon Fantasy Reader, Gruber was pleased to have one of these two tales, The Gun, represented here.

W

ITH ONE EYE on the big clock John Parker shrunk down under the level of his high bookkeeper's desk and began to peel off his black sleeve guards. The task concluded he folded them together and surreptitiously slid open the desk drawer a few inches. He dropped the sleeve guards inside and took out a small whisk broom. Stooping again, he carefully brushed his trousers and finally got a piece of thick flannel from the drawer and rubbed the light film of dust from his shoes.

He timed the work very nicely, so that when he straightened and again looked at the clock it was exactly one-half minute to twelve. It took thirty

seconds to straighten his books on the desk, so that when the bell rang he was able to step around the desk and move promptly toward the cloakroom.

And then he met the frowning eye of Mr. Wilton, the office manager. Mr. Wilton kept his glance on John Parker for one moment, then raised his eyes deliberately to the wall clock. Mr. Wilton did not approve of clock watchers and although Parker was not beating the clock, he was a little too prompt in obeying its message.

The incident dulled Parker's enthusiasm. All morning, he had been looking forward to the lunch hour. He wasn't ordinarily a clock watcher, but today he had been planning something special and had wanted to take advantage of every minute of the sixty allotted for his lunch hour. He was even going to skip his lunch. And now the edge of it had been blunted. He wouldn't really enjoy the auction.

This was a good one, too. It had been advertised in the preceding Sunday papers. John Parker loved auctions. A more or less indifferent bookkeeper in the offices of the Arthur Grain Company, he was one of the best auction bidders in the city. He could bid on a dozen offerings and never get stuck once. He had an instinct for it. Although he lived in a small furnished room, Parker would bid with genuine enthusiasm on a mahogany tallboy and at the exact moment when the price was about right, drop out of the bidding and let the competitor have the tallboy.

Take today. The effects of one Harrison Phillips were to be sold. John Parker knew what to expect. Massive old furniture, musty books, a mysterious ancient trunk or two and a miscellany of statuary monstrosities. Parker had about as much use for any of these objects as he would have had for a zebra, but he would bid enthusiastically on everything that was offered, during the brief forty-five minutes that he would attend the auction, and he wouldn't have to make a single purchase.

It was exactly six minutes after twelve when he entered the auction rooms and found them pleasantly filled with potential bidders. Parker liked competition.

He moved forward and found a seat in the first row which he promptly occupied. He looked up at the auctioneer, a tremendously fat man with a deep bass voice.

"I am offered two dollars and thirty cents," the auctioneer was saying. "Two dollars and thirty cents for this magnificent set of handforged andirons. Ladies and gentlemen, I could get more from a junk dealer. I could—"

"Two thirty-five," John Parker said.

"Two thirty-five," said the auctioneer. "A connoisseur has just entered the bidding, a gentleman of the old school who knows real values. I am offered two thirty-five for these marvelous implements that are as good today as the day they were first forged and which cost the owner perhaps as much as seventy-five or eighty dollars. Two thirty-five; who'll offer five dollars?"

"Two and a half," called a man from the rear.

"Two-fifty, who'll give three dollars? Who'll give two-seventy-five?"

"I will," said John Parker and from that moment on remained quiet.

The auctioneer blustered and cajoled for two or three minutes and finally received an offer of two dollars and eighty-five cents and sold the andirons. He scowled down on John Parker, for the latter was not unknown to the auctioneer.

The auctioneer's assistant brought up a beautiful statue of a nude woman holding a bunch of grapes over her head. It was solid marble and had undoubtedly graced a pedestal in the home of Harrison Phillips for at least fifty or sixty years.

The fat auctioneer scowled at the marble monstrosity and waved it away. He rummaged about on the long counter for a moment, then brought out a huge horse pistol.

"Gentlemen," he boomed. "I say, gentlemen, for this item will interest very few women, but it should delight the heart of every man present, especially those of you who are collectors. Gentlemen, I offer for your pleasure one of the finest items in this entire valuable collection; a dragoon pistol in perfect condition. This beautiful old gun, gentlemen, was the major factor in the winning of the west. It may even have been in use during the late Civil War, although you would not think so, judging from its perfect condition. That is due to the fact that the late owner was a real collector and kept his treasures under glass, taking them out only to clean. Now, gentlemen, I am not going to insult your intelligence by asking you to start bidding with one dollar; I am not going to waste your time with such nonsense, because you know and I know that this rare old dragoon pistol will sell for many times that. So who'll give fifty dollars?"

There was absolute silence in the audience and the auctioneer, clapped a fat hand to his forehead. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, why are you here? Because it's cold outside and it's raining? No, it can't be that, because the weather is beautiful and the sun is shining. Because you're tired and want to rest your

feet? It must be that, because otherwise you would be clamoring to bid for this genuine—"

"One dollar!" said John Parker.

The auctioneer gave him a withering glance. "I'll pretend I did not hear that remark. I'll pretend that the gentleman was only trying to have a little clean, honest fun, because no one could be serious in offering one dollar for this beautiful, rare old treasure."

"Ten dollars!"

John Parker blinked and then jerked around in his chair. No legitimate bidder would jump from one to ten dollars, particularly not for an offering such as this.

He said: "Ten dollars and a quarter," then kept his gaze upon the audience in order to find the rash bidder. He had no trouble finding him, for the man was directly behind Parker and the moment the latter had made his offer, the other man snapped: "Twenty dollars!"

A murmur ran through the audience and even the auctioneer took a step forward on his platform and stared down at the rash bidder.

Parker himself, studied the man with great care. He wasn't a professional bidder, of course, but Parker was trying to size him up. He did not look like a prosperous individual if his clothing meant anything. He wore a rather tight fitting suit of broadcloth that had once been black but had a greenish tinge to it now, indicating age and much wear. He was a deep chested, hard-faced man with sandy hair, the latter long overdue for a haircut. He wore a battered black felt hat with a broader than usual brim. He looked like a farmer. In that case, he *might* have money, despite his appearance.

John Parker said: "Twenty-one dollars."

"Twenty-five," came the prompt bid from the other man.

John Parker turned again in his seat, smiling pleasantly, so the other could see there was no offense in the competitive bidding. Merely good sportsmanship. Something in the man's face startled Parker. The eyes. They were a pale, washed out blue; they were staring eyes—and cold.

"Twenty-six dollars," Parker said.

"Forty dollars!"

Parker cleared his throat. Of course the old gun wasn't worth one-half of that, but then Parker wasn't interested in the object of the bidding. He was attending this auction sale for the same reason that some men go to prize-fights and wrestling matches. Or ball games.

He said: "Forty-one dollars."

And at last he drew blood. The man behind him gasped hoarsely and his breathing came heavily. "Fifty dollars," he roared.

Parker turned and received such a look of malevolence that he winced and remained silent.

The auctioneer glanced at him and began to do his stuff. "Fifty dollars I am offered for this rare *objet d'art*; fifty dollars—"

Parker could not help himself; the sport was too deeply ingrained in him. He knew that the man behind him was determined to possess the dragoon pistol at all costs and it was not sporting to let him have it so easily. He would value it the more if he paid a decent price for it, if he got it only after a stiff fight.

Parker said: "Fifty-one dollars!"

The effect of this bid was startling. The man behind Parker leaped to his feet and uttered a cry of rage. "Damn you," he roared. "I haven't got any more money with me. Take the gun—take it and be sorry!"

And with that he stamped down the aisle, out of the auction rooms.

"—Going," said the auctioneer. "Going for fifty-one dollars." To the lucky gentleman with the celluloid collar.

John Parker recoiled. *He* was the lucky bidder. It so happened that this was the sixteenth of the month and only the day before he had received his semi-monthly salary—fifty-five dollars. It was all in his pocket, as he had missed his landlady the night before and had not yet paid his room rent.

But he didn't want the gun; he couldn't *afford* it if he did have a use for it. If he spent fifty-one dollars now he would be unable to pay his room rent. He would have nothing left for his meals during the next two weeks. He would—

"Here you are, sir," said the auctioneer, "You won after a mighty fine struggle and I congratulate you. Fifty-one dollars—"

John Parker stumbled forward and took the huge dragoon pistol. It was almost a foot long and weighed ten pounds or more. He shuddered and drew the money from his pocket.

Then he turned and walked out of the auction rooms. At the door he collided with a woman about to enter. She saw the object in his hand and squealed.

Parker sneered at her and stepped aside without an apology. He thrust the big weapon under his coat, pressing his left arm against it to hold it secure.

He walked several blocks up Dearborn before he realized that he was going in the wrong direction and cut west to LaSalle, where he turned south. As he crossed Monroe he noted by a clock in a store window, that it was two minutes

after one. Damn, now he would catch it from Mr. Wilton, the office manager.

He continued a little further down LaSalle then turned into a tall office building and rode up to the twelfth floor. As he entered the offices of the Arthur Grain Company he saw that it was eight minutes after one by the time clock just inside the door.

He strode through the office toward the cloakroom. And there, just as he was about to enter, he encountered Mr. Wilton.

There was a gleam in the office manager's eye. "Ah, good evening, Mr. Parker," he said, sarcastically. "Did you have a pleasant lunch at the club? Did you engage in a little bridge, perhaps . . . ?"

John Parker reached under his coat and produced the big pistol. Holding it by the butt he laid the long barrel along the left temple of Mr. Wilton.

Mr. Wilton screamed and fell to the floor like a dead pigeon.

John Parker stared down at the unconscious form of the office manager. He was aware that there was excitement all around him, that his fellow workers were rushing about.

"Parker laid out Wilton!" someone cried in a tone of awe. And another: "The worm turned; Jeez, Caspar Milquetoast conked the boss."

It was true, but to what an extent not even John Parker knew at that moment. He only knew that something had happened to him. It was as if an iron chain that had bound his conscience all of his life had suddenly snapped. He was free.

Wilton had persecuted him a thousand times and at last Parker had struck back. Savagely . . . yet he had no regrets.

He finally raised his head and looked around the circle of faces that ringed him. "He had it coming to him," he muttered.

"Yeah, sure," Doolin said. Doolin was the office bully. It was he who had put glue in Parker's inkwell. And now he looked into Parker's eyes and took a backward step.

Beyond the immediate circle a voice cried petulantly. "Here, here, what's going on? Are you people working here or are you just playing games?"

"J. B.," someone said and the office employees began to disperse, leaving John Parker to face J. B. Arthur, the head of the firm.

"Here, you," old J. B. snapped. "Get back to—what have you done to Wilton?" A gasp. "What's that in your hand—a gun?"

"Yeah," said Parker. "You want to make something of it?"

J. B. Arthur's eyes threatened to pop from his head. "What's that? You dare to speak to *me* like that—?"

Parker smiled crookedly and advanced upon J. B. The president of the Arthur Grain Company was too astounded for a moment to even move, but when he saw the gun in Parker's hand come up he let out a shriek that could have been heard down on La Salle Street, and whirling started for his private office in a headlong rush.

Deliberately, Parker brought up the ancient gun. He squeezed the trigger and was not surprised when the gun thundered and a pane of ground glass crashed in the door of old J. B.'s private office.

Arthur screamed again and diving into his office, headed for the lavatory. Gaining its comparative safety he locked himself inside.

But John Parker did not pursue. He was no longer interested in J. B. Arthur, or anyone connected with the Arthur Grain Company. He stuck the old revolver under his coat once more and sauntered out of the office.

Outside, he walked to Clark Street and caught a northbound street car. Fifteen minutes later he alighted at Lincoln Park and walked four blocks west and a half block south, finally turning into a dingy three-story brick building.

He entered a door and started to climb a worn flight of stairs. When he was halfway up a woman came out to the landing on the first floor and called to him:

"Oh, Mr. Parker, I just wanted to remind you. You forgot the rent."

Parker turned slowly. "I didn't forget it."

"Then you can give it to me now. Seven dollars for the half month, you know."

Parker said: "Go to hell."

Mrs. Leonard, a stout, motherly-looking woman blinked and then gasped. "What did you say?"

Parker repeated the phrase then turned and continued climbing to the second floor. He walked down the long dark hall until he reached the last room on the left-hand side. He opened the door—it was never locked—and switched on the electric light, for it was so dark in the room a light was needed even in midafternoon.

A man was sitting in the creaking rocking-chair that stood next to Parker's bed. It was the man from the auction rooms, the unsuccessful bidder for the old dragoon pistol.

As Parker entered, the man rose from the chair and towered over Parker. He was no more than six feet tall and weighed perhaps a hundred and ninety

pounds, but compared to Parker's five-seven and one hundred and forty pounds he was a veritable giant.

Yet Parker returned him look for look. "What the devil are you doing in my room?" Parker demanded.

"The gun," the other man said. "I want it."

"Then you should have outbid me."

"I didn't have any more money. But you don't want that gun. You haven't any use for it."

"I can sell it," Parker sneered. "It's evidently a rare specimen."

"No, it isn't. It's a plain, ordinary Navy Colt. They made thousands of them during the Civil War and this one is no better than hundreds that are still in existence. Any gun collector will sell you one just like it for twenty dollars."

"Then why did *you* bid fifty dollars for it?"

"Because it's my gun."

Parker glowered. "If it's your gun how'd it happen to get into the effects of Harrison Phillips?"

"His father acquired it some years ago. Harrison Phillips didn't know to whom it belonged originally. He kept it in a glass case all these years."

"Then why didn't you buy it from Phillips?"

"I couldn't. He wasn't the right type."

"And you think I am. Well, you're wrong. I'm not. I bought this gun fair and square and I'm going to keep it."

"It'll be the sorriest thing you've ever done. *I* know, believe me. You see, I was the same type."

John Parker took the gun from under his coat and hefted it in his hand. "I like the gun."

"Yes, I know. And you've already used it. Another inch to the right and you'd have killed J. B. Arthur. Next time you won't miss."

Parker's eyes became slits. "What do you know about J. B. Arthur?"

The other man shrugged. "I saw what you did. You laid out Wilton and then you took a potshot at Arthur. And now you're planning to take a shot at me."

The hair seemed to stand up on the back of Parker's neck. But there was no thought in his mind of backing down.

"Who the devil are you?"

"The original owner of that gun."

"You're crazy. You said yourself that Harrison Phillips' father had acquired

this gun from the original owner. I happen to know that Harrison Phillips was over seventy when he died."

"That's right. His father got the gun in 1862."

Parker laughed harshly. "Now, I know you're crazy. You're not over thirty-eight or forty at the most."

A grim smile played over the big man's mouth. "I killed my first man—with that gun—in 1864—"

Parker hefted the big revolver once more, then suddenly pointed it at the other man. "All right, put 'em up. I'm going to call the wagon and have you taken back to that booby hatch from which you—hey—!"

Parker pressed the trigger and the room rocked to the deafening explosion. Through the haze of black smoke came a mocking laugh. "I'll see you again."

Parker was alone in the room.

He whirled and leaped to the door. A quick glance down the hall showed him that it was empty. He darted back into the room, circled the rocking-chair and sprang to the window. It was down tight—and locked.

There were no closets in the room, only a row of nails in the wall upon which hung Parker's meager supply of clothing.

"I'll be damned," Parker muttered. "Where'd he go?"

After a moment his eyes came to a focus on a patch of broken plaster behind the bed. He straddled the bed and examined the plaster. Yes, a bullet had gone in here. He'd completely missed the big man. Either that or the bullet had gone clean through him and embedded itself in the wall. But in that case, the man wouldn't have been able to make such a swift getaway. In fact, he couldn't have made a getaway anyhow. Yet he was gone. The smoke from the black powder had made a haze and he had seemingly disappeared into it; but he had been a little hazy before that. It was the reason Parker had fired.

Damn it. His eyes. There was something wrong with them. Parker rubbed them fiercely with his knuckles. It didn't seem to help any. Or hurt. He saw about the same as before.

He turned to the door but before he stepped out he heard the heavy tramp of many feet. Ah—!

He leaped out and thrust his gun down the hall. "Stand where you are!" he thundered.

The hall was full of bluecoats. They had guns in their hands.

"Take it easy, buddy," the leader of them declared. "The heat's been too much for you, but you don't want to get into no more serious trouble than you're in now. Put down that cannon—"

"Back," snarled Parker. "Get back or I'll blow the lot of you to hell."

"Don't shoot!" cried the policeman. "I'm sure Mr. Arthur won't press his complaint. We got our duty to do, but don't—"

Parker fired into the solid mass of blue. In the confined quarters he couldn't miss. The ancient Navy Colt made a tremendous noise as it went off. Police revolvers barked in reply and bullets splattered along the narrow hall. The aiming was very poor, however. The policemen were too demoralized. They were already trying to retreat and as Parker charged, firing into their midst, they broke completely and pitched down the staircase. One or two lost their footing and tripped the others and the lot of them went down in a solid pile. Except a couple who remained on the hall floor upstairs.

Parker followed to the stairwell and sent one final shot after them. Then the hammer clicked on an empty cartridge. With an oath, Parker drew back. He tried to snap out the cylinder and found that it was a stationary one. In fact, the revolver didn't use cartridges. It had a series of tiny nipples over which were fitted small copper caps. The loads were evidently forced into the chambers from the front. In short, it was a cap and ball pistol. And Parker, having used up all six loads, couldn't reload.

He swore roundly and retreated down the hall. There was a fire-escape at the rear of the building. He navigated it successfully, coming down to the ground in the backyard. He clambered over a wooden fence and scooted through a semi-dark hallway of a house and finally emerged upon another street.

By that time he had put the gun away under his coat and walked swiftly up the street. At the corner he turned east and found a drug store. Entering he went to the telephone at the rear of the store and consulted the classified phone directory. He found what he sought under "G" and nodded in satisfaction.

Twenty minutes later, John Parker stepped out of an elevator in a dingy building on Wells Street and proceeded toward a ground-glass door. He pushed it open and entered a gloomy gunsmith's shop. The walls were hung with scores of guns of all shapes and sizes and in all stages of repair.

A fat, bald man with grimy hands got up from a work bench and came up behind a glass counter. "Yes, sir," he said. "What can I do for you?"

"I've a gun," Parker said. "I'd like you to look at it." He took it out from under his coat and extended it to the gunsmith. The latter took it and sniffed the muzzle.

"It's been fired lately."

Parker grunted. "I was doing some target practice with it."

The smith nodded and twirled the cylinder, then snapped the trigger. "It seems to work all right."

"Oh, yes, that wasn't what I wanted. I'm interested in getting an idea of the gun's value, that's all."

"Oh! Well, it's a Navy Colt. Probably the best revolver ever made by Samuel Colt. So good that almost every gun you find of its type is still in working condition."

"What's it worth?"

"That's the trouble. Colt made six hundred thousand of these and a good many thousand are still in existence. Maybe twelve-fifteen dollars."

"This one's worth more," growled Parker. "A good deal more."

"Not to me it isn't. I've got a half dozen in the shop now."

"As good as this one?"

"Every bit. I'll show you. . . ."

"But you can't shoot them. The bullets—"

The gunsmith smiled. "A good many gun fanciers still shoot these guns. I carry a supply of caps, balls and the old-time paper cartridges."

"Let's see them," Parker cried eagerly.

The gunsmith hesitated a moment, then shrugged and went to a shelf. He brought out three boxes of different sizes and putting them on the glass counter, picked up Parker's Navy Colt. He detached the small ramrod and used it to remove the used copper caps.

He replaced them with new from a box and then picked up a paper cartridge containing powder. He tore the paper with his teeth and poured powder into a chamber after which he wrapped a lead ball into a flannel patch and poked it down on top of the powder.

Parker watched the proceedings closely, but when the gunsmith had loaded three chambers he suddenly snatched the gun from his hands. "I can fill the rest myself. Now bring out your money!"

The gunsmith's mouth fell open in astonishment. "What-what?"

"You heard me; shell out. This is a hold-up."

"But—but I haven't got any money—"

"I'm going to count up to three," Parker said, ominously. "One—two—"

"I'll give it to you," cried the gunsmith. "Just a minute and I'll give you everything I've got." He scrambled to an old steel safe and began fumbling with the combination.

He got it right after a couple of false attempts and swung open the door. His

hand darted in, he whirled and came up with a very efficient looking automatic. "Now," he began.

That was the last word he ever spoke. The Navy Colt in Parker's fist thundered and the .36 caliber bullet whacked into the smith's head.

Parker sprang around the counter and swooped down upon the open safe, hurdling the dead body of the gunsmith. He reached into the safe and took out a tin-box. A chagrined exclamation escaped his lips for the box contained only three one-dollar bills.

He stuffed the money in a pocket and came around the counter once more. He picked up the three boxes containing caps, powder cartridges and leaden balls and distributing them about his person left the gunsmith's shop.

At the elevator bank he pushed the down button. The light overhead showed white and the elevator door opened. A man stepped out and Parker took a backward step.

It was the big man who claimed ownership of the Navy Colt.

The elevator door clanged shut and the big man grinned wolfishly at Parker.

"Nice going," he said. "A couple more today and you'll equal my record at Centralia."

"Who are you?" Parker gasped hoarsely.

"Don't you know?"

"No, but I think—say, how'd you know what I just did?"

"The same way I knew about what you did at your office, then at your rooming house. I was watching you—"

"But you couldn't have!"

"Oh, but I could. And I'll be watching you right along. You're pretty good—with my gun."

Parker reached under his coat and gripped the butt of the revolver. The big man held up his hand. "Save your powder; I've a proposition to make to you."

"Talk fast," said Parker. "Talk fast, because I'm getting awfully fed up with you and—"

"Swell. I think you'll make a good partner. Now, listen, I've cased this layout and I think it's a soft touch for two good men. We ought to get, mmm, thirty thousand."

"Dollars?"

"In good Federal notes. No Confederate stuff."

"Where is it?"

The big man laughed. "Is it a deal?"

"I'm keeping the gun."

"All right, keep it. I've got a six-shooter of my own. We may have to use our guns, but you're not afraid of that. They can't hang you any deader for one more. And you can do a lot of traveling with fifteen thousand dollars."

Fifteen, thought John Parker. Thirty thousand—and one extra bullet.

At precisely twelve noon of that day, John Parker had quailed under the frown of Wilton, the office manager of the Arthur Grain Company. Now, ten hours later, Parker was reading the evening edition of the morning newspaper. A headline screamed at him:

KILLER TERRORIZES CITY

And in smaller headlines:

Bookkeeper Runs Amok. Shoots At Employer, Kills One Policeman, Wounds Another and Murders Gunsmith. Most Dangerous Killer in Annals of Police History.

The big man, who said his name was Howard, touched John Parker's arm. "All right, we'd better get started. But I'm warning you, it's going to be close. If you haven't got the nerve—"

Parker tossed the newspaper out of the car window. "Let's go!"

He stepped on the starter and as the motor roared, shifted into low. It was a big, powerful car. Parker had picked it out on Michigan Boulevard. He shifted into second and zoomed up West Adams Street.

They crossed the river and turned left into Canal Street. Parker found a parking place by a fire hydrant and stopped the car. He locked the ignition and put the key in his pocket where he could get it quickly.

"Now, we'll see who's got the nerve," he said to his companion.

Both got out of the car and walked across the street to the huge railroad terminal. They entered and walked briskly up a ramp into the giant waiting room.

"Take a look around," suggested Howard. "We've got to head the right way when we're finished and there are so many doors—"

"I know this place as well as my own room," Parker said and then wondered if he had really known his room at all. Howard had made a rather easy get-away from it that afternoon.

They approached the ticket windows, but when they reached them made a sharp right turn and went to a door, marked *private*. Howard rapped on the door with his knuckles.

The ticket seller, blood streaming from his head, was bringing out stacks of bills. Parker stuffed them into the side pockets of the light topcoat he had acquired earlier in the evening. They were satisfying packets of bills.

The ticket seller raised his hands.

"That's all—"

"Fine," said Parker and shot him through the head. Then he turned and coolly stepped out of the vault.

"All right," said Howard. "Now, let's see how you are on the getaway. A job doesn't count unless you get away."

Parker ran to the door leading into the waiting room proper and whipped it open. A policeman was charging upon him, less than thirty feet away. Without breaking his stride, Parker sent a bullet at the policeman and saw him pitch forward on his face.

Policemen seemed to be coming from all sides, then. Parker and Howard ran, firing to the right and left. Bullets whizzed about them and one raked Parker's left shoulder. It stung, but the pain wasn't much.

And then they were clear of the railroad station and running across the street to the parked car. A bluecoat was standing beside it, writing out a ticket.

Parker let him have a bullet, right in the stomach. As the man went down, he jerked open the door by the driver's seat and climbed in behind the wheel. He got out the ignition key, started the car and jerked it away from the curb. At that moment, the policeman lying in the street got out his service revolver and taking careful aim, fired.

A sudden roaring filled John Parker's ears. For a moment a red haze appeared before his eyes, then it vanished and he saw the huge concrete pillar directly before him. He knew that he ought to turn the wheel of the car, but couldn't. As if from a distance he heard the crash—

Howard said: "Are you ready to give me the gun?"

Parker knew that it was only a matter of seconds. "Take it!" he gasped.

Howard shook his head. "No, I can't take it. You've got to give it to me."

The gun was in John Parker's hand. But it was heavy—heavy. He tried to lift it and couldn't. He saw alarm come into Howard's face.

"I—I can't lift it—"

"You've got to," Howard cried. "It's sixty years. It's too long. You've got to give me the gun. Try. Try hard!"

Parker tried once more and blood gushed from his mouth. "Who—who are you?" he quavered.

"Don't you know?" Howard exclaimed. "I'm the original owner of that gun. I'm . . . Jesse James!"

"But you said your name was Howard."

"Of course. It's the name I always used. I couldn't go around telling people I was Jesse James, could I? A hundred Pinkerton men were looking for me, a thousand sheriffs, twenty thousand Federal soldiers. And none of them got me. No man ever got me as long as I had that gun on me. And then—then I put it down one day. I stepped up on a chair to straighten a picture and Bob Ford killed me. Shot me from behind, the dirty little coward. They wrote a song about it:

"The dirty little coward

Who shot Mr. Howard—"

The roaring was in John Parker's ears again. He was slipping down—down.

"Jesse James," he said. "The gun of Jesse James. So that's why—"

"Of course, of course!" said Jesse James, impatiently. "The gun's cursed. Every man who owns it is cursed. That's why, I have to get it. I—I can't rest until I get the gun. Give it to me, Parker. Give it to me—and die!"

There was an ounce of strength still in John Parker's body. An ounce of strength and a grain of will power. He co-ordinated the two and brought up the Navy Colt.

"Take it!" he said, and died.

Statement by Amos Willoughby

"I knew he was batty when he started bidding for the gun. It was a piece of junk, worth maybe ten or twelve dollars as a museum piece. He said a dollar, then before I could say a word he raised the price to ten dollars. From then on he kept raising himself until he got up to fifty-one dollars, when I knocked the gun down to him. Can you imagine a guy bidding against himself? Sure, he was batty. Every time he made a dollar bid he squirmed around like he was looking at another bidder. And no one else made a bid against him!"

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